5 O'Clock Whistle

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5 O'Clock Whistle

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Summary

"At times I would like you to be home - here," Hannibal says, correcting himself out of a term that was too familiar. "But forcing you to be will not resolve the issue."

It is perhaps the closest Hannibal has come to fully admitting how much he relies on Will, even still. He does not need Will to listen to his issues, to balance his books or shoot his enemies, but he needs him. It is that that sinks beneath his skin and leaves him tensest at moments like these, drawn bowstring tight.

At the very precipice of WWII, choices and chances lead to some things you can't step away from so easily.

The last set of the Nice Work If You Can Get It series. It helps of you've read the others, but you can just easily read without them. You will miss a lot of the references, though, and not recognize the characters that show up later, but the smut is just as delicious, and there is quite enough of it.

Notes

This was just going to be one part, of course, but it turned into 4 chapters. This is the conclusion to the entire series, it ties up a lot of loose ends and is hopefully worth the wait.

Thank you all so so much for the love and support throughout.

This set is dedicated to two amazing people, May, who is wonderful and deserves everything amazing. She is also responsible for the very ending of this fic, so you can thank her for it (no sarcasm intended, it is a good ending), and to Cassie, who not only draws the most incredible things, but was kind enough to grace us with a piece of art for this story: which you really need to take a look at.

Chapter 1

Since Hannibal had allowed Will some freedom, the tension in the apartment had thawed to a bearable chill, dissipated mostly by their quiet conversations and other regular habits. As promised, Will leaves a note in the ledger when he leaves the apartment, and although he returns within the time limit he suggests in his note, he doesn't yet make the effort to keep his hours 'comfortable'.

More often than not, he'll press the door closed quietly at perhaps 2am, hang up his key, make his way upstairs to quickly undress and find himself pulled into a sleepy – if slightly irritated – embrace when he crawls into bed. He's grown used to feeling the tension in Hannibal shift, from concern and worry that this time, this time, would be the time Will didn't come back, to annoyance at the hour, to the general resignation and welcome his arms always offered. Despite everything else.

He supposes once the novelty of being able to leave the house – even with the collar on under his scarf – wears off, his hours will slip slowly into the daylight, keeping similar hours to Hannibal to make sure they share their evenings. But for the moment, he enjoys the slight buzz of rebellion he gets knowing he's out at an ungodly hour with the freedom to leave the city if he chose.

He never does.

He always comes back.

He supposes he always will.

It's different though, this time, when he comes home and hangs up his key. He knows Hannibal isn't upstairs sleeping as he always is, he's framed in a dark sharp silhouette against the windows, sitting at the counter in the kitchen and waiting. This is the first time the man has blatantly waited for him, not masked it as sleeping or 'late night work' in the study. There's tension there but not anger, and Will unwinds his scarf to hang it up – his coat following – before making his way to the other room and leaning his hip against the counter to Hannibal's right.

"Mind working too fast to let you sleep?" he asks, voice low but not quite a whisper. He works his tie loose and undoes the first few buttons as he speaks. The collar's there, as promised, perhaps in reassurance for when the man looks up at him.

"I've had a call," Hannibal obliges the request for an answer, and he does look up - though not first at the collar, simply trusting it will be there. For a moment he looks at Will, and there is a distant vulnerability. It has been there since the man made the bridge and crossed the gap into Hannibal's life, but very rarely does he allow it to be visible.

The churn of thoughts continues on in him, however, and his dark eyes turn away when they go dull again in his considerations, in the calculations that send him looking out over the city again, along the side of the kitchen that is open to it. In the months since he had claimed Will

he has seemed often preoccupied, but he no longer shares his work with the man - how can he?

War, as always, has brought upheaval, and ambitions come to light. Europe has not yet fallen headfirst into it, and America suggests to itself that it may remain reserved as it had attempted to in the Great War, but soon enough the dominos would start to fall again - the Great War had served to produce a furious stacking of them, and a failure to learn from how they had fallen before. Trade is becoming uncertain, difficult - and with every new difficulty, Hannibal's ability to deliver suffers.

His control affords him at least one luxury he does not wish to surrender. He holds the decision against his chest, like unplayed cards.

"It hardly matters," he continues after a moment, though his hand lifts to press his fingers against the cool glass of the window. In the end, he knows what he will surrender. "How was your night out?"

The question comes out tense. Perhaps the late evenings of Will's that he spent wandering like a stray cat were sitting heavily, compounding on themselves to form something that would eventually topple over. It might topple now, by the neutral expression on Hannibal's features, but it could just be his thoughts.

Will regards him before pressing his lips together lightly and nodding.

“The change of scenery helps.” He answers honestly. He doesn’t go anywhere when he goes out, he meanders. he walks past his old apartment block and wonders who lives in his home now, he walks past vendors, occasionally purchases things that remind him of better times. He watches the city, he watches the people in it. he immerses himself in the environment until he can forget that he has a curfew – self-imposed but regardless – that he has a collar, that the world is at war.

For a moment longer they’re quiet. Will doesn’t ask Hannibal what the call was about; the man won’t tell him. And rightfully so considering everything. But he misses the time he could help, could be the sounding board for new expansions or closing old deals, misses being able to reassure the man that something would work out and then spend his time making sure it did.

“It bothers you I come home late.” He says quietly. “I always come back, Hannibal.”

Hannibal nods, and for a moment his features allow the expression to touch them - Will has done everything he's asked and reasonably. He had stretched the dimensions of the rule, pushed until he could find the definition on his own, and Hannibal has not reined him in for it. He's let Will find the edges of the chain inside himself. It's not the skirting of defiance that bothers him - Will has not defied him, though he has certainly courted the idea.

There is something else, then. Not a weakness in Will that sets him standing there with his back in a tense line and his shoulders set. All of the posture suggests that the weakness lives where he has never abided it, in himself. He won't admit it, it's too instinctive not to.

"At times I would like you to be home - here," he says instead, correcting himself out of a term that was too familiar. "But forcing you to be will not resolve the issue."

It is perhaps the closest Hannibal has come to fully admitting how much he relies on Will, even still. He does not need Will to listen to his issues, to balance his books or shoot his enemies, but he needs him. It is that that sinks beneath his skin and leaves him tensest at moments like these, drawn bowstring tight.

Will watches him, doesn't say anything for a long time as he watches Hannibal's face work to keep expressions from it, and his body from bending in any way but what might suggest exhaustion. There is fear in him, fear Will has seen before, one time at Nantuxent, just before the war, when they had come so close to figuring the other out, so close to laying it all bare.

Hannibal does not wear vulnerability well, it makes him bitter and angry and bitterness and anger make him dangerous. Will knows that, knows him well enough for it now. He's infinitely grateful that Hannibal hasn't attempted to harden his rules, forbid Will to go out past a certain hour, like a misbehaving child. Because as he knows Hannibal, Hannibal knows him, and he knows stifling Will would only do harm, not good.

He takes a breath, licks his lips and brings his hands up to pull his tie from its knot completely, laying the silk down against the counter before running the backs of his knuckles up Hannibal's arm to his shoulder.

"Come upstairs," he suggests. And there is not a hint of pity, no hint of doing this out of obligation. He can't take back the last few weeks of staying out till dawn for his own freedom, he can't take away whatever is bringing Hannibal down to his instinct and tension, but he can give him something familiar.

Hannibal's eyes do something unusual, even as he leaves his attention on the city for a moment longer. They warm and soften, the eyelids ease as if Will had drawn something out of him with the touch. He is, despite himself, reassured. He has no fear that Will is going to disappear forever - he could be gone a day, a week perhaps. Hannibal might harden himself to a year. It would never be forever, if either of them has faith in anything.

Will waits for Hannibal to turn to him, gives him a small smile before letting his eyes slide to the man's lips and away. Then he pushes off from the counter and quietly moves to the staircase.

Hannibal's gaze is firm when he turns it at last. He follows by compulsion, by desire. They are halfway up the stairs when he discovers he is being led, and on any other night it would not bother him - should not now, but here instead there is some rage that curls up out of the depths of him. He seizes the situation back, at one of the curves in the metal spiral stair, the last before they reach the top where it affords an elevated gaze out the plate windows into the darkness of the city.

He pins Will between his hips and the metal railing, and curls his arms around the man's middle, and then he bites the back of Will's neck above the collar in a gesture that is undeserved and unprovoked. Sharp and possessive and desperately frustrated. He is grateful

to be given leave, to be allowed this familiarity, and now it's Hannibal's turn to push the terms.

Will struggles for just a moment, thrown off by the unexpected show of violence, but it lasts long enough for him to regain his balance, to grab against the railing and blink himself back to the present moment out of the dark places his mind was shoved to. He makes a sound, a low soft thing, and pushes back.

It’s been a long time since he’s had Hannibal pin him from frustration, a very long time. Perhaps back in the early stages of their relationship, at the very beginning when keeping their hands off each other was a challenge and a half, where every night was one position or another, several in the space of a few hours until they were both exhausted and satisfied. One day in particular when he had been pinned here, almost exactly here, with the sun streaming through the windows still and Will managing to babble quietly about how someone could see before Hannibal made him forget why he cared.

Now he ducks his head, eyes closed and lips parted before he turns his chin to the side and offers Hannibal that as well. The man was pressing against him like he wanted to remind Will where he was and why, touching him with a desperation neither had allowed themselves to feel since before the war.

“I’m here,” he tells him, but it comes out as a partial groan. His fingers squeeze tighter around the railing and he forces his entire body to surrender to this.

Hannibal eases back on the pressure with his teeth, and pulls in a breath that sounds wet through its contact with skin. He has to settle himself with his feet on separate steps to keep them both solid, to saddle Will's hips against his own as Will leans into him. He is steady enough for both of them, usually. This particular moment, it's nice to have the reminder.

It's the view over Will's shoulder, familiar, that brings his memories to the front. Then, as now, he had needed to be touching Will. The reasons had been different.

"I'm glad," Hannibal allows, before lifting his mouth entirely from the impressions he'd left in Will's skin - where it would mark certainly. He can see the city below them, his city, a thousand pinpoints of light in darker shapes against a dark canvas. It's cold outside, by the way steam rises in places, by the touches of frost at the edges of the windows. Inside, the heaters hiss warmth, and Hannibal reaches up with one hand to turn Will a little further into the kiss - just a hair as he leans around. This too is possessive - not so much a claim as a protection.

His other hand moves down instead, running his palm roughly over Will's groin - it is almost a request for permission, save that he needn't do any such thing. It's there anyway.

Will makes another sound, a gentle one, and pushes his hips forward into the hold, breaking the kiss to breathe. He can feel the tension in Hannibal behind him, remembers how similar anger had radiated off him the day he’d saved Will from the bathhouse, when he’d pressed him against the counter in the first show of true anger Will had ever seen directed at himself.

And as frightening as the outburst had been, Will finds himself responding, hardening in Hannibal’s hand, breaths becoming quicker, sounds flowing with them. He wants to tell him something, to reassure him, to ask him to confide in Will as he had done, to ask him what he can do to make that expression he’d seen on Hannibal downstairs go away, how he can knead the tension from his shoulders.

He doesn’t even know what day it is, doesn’t know if he’ll be able to wake Hannibal up in the morning, slow and lazy, straddle him and guide him in slow, endure the pressure so they can watch the clouds of their breath in the cold morning air mingle for a few moments. Or if he’ll wake up alone, the ledger the only connection to what schedule Hannibal will hold that day.

He brings one hand down to press against Hannibal’s, encouraging and almost desperate as he splays his fingers over the other man’s, guides with the heel of his hand until he’s rolling his hips back in a gentle motion over and over, eyes falling closed against the city and its lights. The last time he’d been here, it was summer. Hot and sticky and – at the time – far filthier than either had gotten in a moment of passion like this. He still remembered the day fondly, he had remembered it then for a long, long time.

Then, they had been miserable with the heat, sticking and sweating wherever their naked skin had touched, friction forming between their wet thighs. Wetness had condensed between Hannibal's stomach and Will's back as he'd pushed in and leaned them both over the rail until they hung out over the space and he could feel Will's heart rate quicken to pounding at the dizzying sensation.

Hannibal is hard quickly between the tension already in him and Will pushing back eagerly against him in suggestive surges. He struggles with Will's belt, but he doesn't close his eyes to the city, not to the thousand lights that still burn even at this hour as he tugs the leather belt free of the loops of Will's slacks and lets it fall between the rails to the wood floor half a story down, the tongue and frame clattering musically against the thud of leather. It's still his, for the moment - the city, not the belt - and he possesses it nearly as fiercely as he does Will, even with the other still able to lead him.

Despite the heating in the apartment, the air is still cool enough around them that the warmth of skin beneath the layers of clothing, the hardness growing into Hannibal's palm as Will's cock fills and responds to both their hands, is welcome. He doesn't relent for skin on skin, not just yet, not until distraction renders the stars and the city lights inseparable, and then he works the buttons, the fly, and feels Will shiver against him at the sudden change in temperature of the air against his heated skin.

He rolls his hips into his motions as he gathers Will's cock into his fist, stroking slow but firm - firm as his touches had been guided through the fabric, only now it's skin on skin. In the summer, when this had been slow and sticky and lazy, the daylight had turned the windows invisible so they had seemed to hang out into the sky when Hannibal looked up. He had seen cars moving down below, in perfect cadence to the beads of sweat rolling down his back in slow rivers. Now the light from within the apartment spoils the effect in small spots. Hannibal's eyes find focus, as he closes his teeth against Will's shoulder, the whole line of his body bending Will over the rail and the edge of the collar pressed against Hannibal's cheek with a refreshingly cool kiss of metal.

He rolls his hips again, finding friction without direct contact, and watches the expression play out on Will's features as he does, the soft knitting brows, the way his mouth changes shape when Hannibal times the movement of his hand to the pushing of his hips.

He lets go of skin, and turns his mouth against Will's ear, still watching from the corner of his eyes. "Look," he tells Will.

Will obeys almost on reflex, directing his eyes up until he can see their blurred reflection hovering over the city. The way his cheeks are flushed and lips parted, hair in disarray from nothing more than his own writhing. Can see the way Hannibal watches them as well, over Will’s shoulder, expression that strange mixture of possessive and vulnerable, as though holding Will and pressing against him is the only thing stopping him flying apart.

He ducks his head a moment and adjusts his position, arching his back in a deeper curve, moving one leg to rest on the stair above to spread his legs wider into this, and then he looks up again.

Beyond them is the city, alive and breathing, filling the sky with light enough to see by, to see the outlines of the skyscrapers with their endless windows and points that melt into the night sky, the veins of the streets that run sluggish with cars and cabs, the constant streetlights, the unending activity.

It moves like a slow heartbeat below them, counterpoint to Will's own, and Hannibal's against his arching back. It's theirs - or as much theirs as anybody's, but from up here, with their reflections painted over it, it feels that way.

He turns his head slightly and feels Hannibal nuzzle against him, the hand against Will not stilling, the other curled around his chest again, keeping it from pressing too hard against the railing for the moment. It becomes difficult to keep the desperation at bay. He murmurs the man’s name, bites his tongue on a whimper of need and says it again, louder, a plea more than a demand. This tastes different to their summer; they both worry much more now.

Hannibal answers his name with a soft noise, and he lets his hand still, leans back a little to take some of the pressure off of Will, but he turns and tells him, "Stay," before he draws back all the way, and then glances at the window, at their reflection, making indirect eye contact, before he presses his mouth affectionately against Will's temple and continues up the last two steps to see to what they'll need to continue.

It leaves Will alone for a moment, exposed, and gives him a chance to catch his breath and think, as Hannibal stands upstairs. He strips his cufflinks at last, his suit jacket, and shirt, and stands at the top of the stairs looking down at Will as he sees to his own pants and the socks with them. He seems on the verge of speaking, the words seeming to gather behind his eyes and at the back of his throat, but instead he moves, silent, back to where Will is waiting.

The reprieve is welcome, and Will obeys the quiet command without retaliation. He rests against the railing, allows himself to duck his head to stare down at the level below them instead of through the glass at the city. Something about this particular brand of desperation makes Will nervous, but he manages only to catch his breath by the time Hannibal is behind him again and Will arches back into the touch.

“You can see further past the city at night,” Will murmurs, turning his head into the gentle petting again, his voice is still unsteady, with the edge of desperate it gets when Hannibal teases him and leaves him. he doesn’t do it often, only in play when they can both handle it, when they both need the sport.

He wants to ask Hannibal to tell him what brought him to this, why now. He wants to turn and kiss the man, drag his fingers through his hair and pull their bodies flush together, but he’d asked him to stay. And even that alone gave Will pause, because it resonated so much louder than simply a command not to move.

Perhaps it hadn't been intentionally phrased, but subliminally it was certainly intended. He is pleased to find Will still there, however it was intended. He runs his fingers gently down Will's spine in a long line from his shoulders to his tailbone, through the fabric of his shirt, and then lifts them back to his collar.

He undoes the buckle on that, too, in a slow gesture, and lets it fall after the belt.

"When the air is cold, you can see further still," Hannibal informs, as the leather and metal clatter beneath them. He presses his mouth over the place where the buckle had left a faint impression in skin. He pauses, and finds occasion to make a faint, amused sound.

"You're overdressed." He reaches for Will's pants, passing him the lube so he can hold onto it while Hannibal divests him of them. Unusual that it's not Hannibal who is the one in an overabundance of clothing.

Will feels himself smile and rests his forehead against the rail, shifting as Hannibal undresses him to help. He doesn’t bother with his shirt for the moment; he can luxuriate in pressing his skin against the cool sheets once this is done, once the initial desperate possession is over and Hannibal is able to talk in more than monosyllables and sharp sentences.

He shivers a little at Hannibal’s hands against his skin, already anticipating how those fingers will feel working him open, how they’ll feel pressing bruises into his hips as Hannibal holds him still. He knows those hands, in calmer moments has spent time comparing them to his own, splaying his fingers to see if they measure up to Hannibal’s, pressing palm to palm. He knows how they feel against his face, gentle in his hair in the early morning before Hannibal leaves him for the day, how strong they are, how much they’ve seen.

He’s memorized Hannibal this way slowly, not that he’d ever tell him, but he had started wanting to know the man inside out and has grown to know him exceptionally well.

With the collar off, Will has permission to take this how he likes - to ask for as much of the control as he wants. Perhaps wisely, he just surrenders further, and for a long moment Hannibal just touches him along all his planes, in long lines along his sides, a soft palm over Will's belly that narrowly avoids his cock even as he shifts forward in anticipation, and then over the tops of both his thighs at the same time, as if making a map of him.

Defining his territory.

He reclaims the lube finally, with Will still waiting patiently for him. If anyone has learned best how to draw the tension out of Hannibal, it's Will. He opens up and accepts it the same way he does as Hannibal pushes lubricated fingers against him, urgent but not cruel. He wants this, he wants Will his and safe in his city, and he seeks after it like time is running out. He does not stretch Will as much as he usually does, but he is sure the other is ready as he works himself slick with his other hand.

Hannibal leans close over him as he pushes in, his hands slick on Will's hips as he pulls the other back firmly - it's a stretch he'll feel for certain, not as easy in this position, and both of them are too tense for the ease of utter relaxation. Hannibal reaches forward and closes his hand on the bar of the handrail next to one of Will's, and opens his mouth against Will's shoulder to exhale in force - he feels it too, perhaps not as acutely, but he feels it.

Will’s lips part on a silent groan as he adjusts, panting hot against the railing. He arches into the hot breath he can feel through his shirt, bites his lip before shifting his hips, an encouragement for Hannibal to move if he’s ready to. He’ll be sore in the morning but not in agony; even when Hannibal had been less than pleased with Will he has never done him irreparable damage, short sharp shock perhaps, but never outright pain.

He raises his head just enough to see the city again, lights blurred to furry specks against the glass as he sets himself and Hannibal into focus, lets his eyes travel over how they’re positioned, how their faces respond to the pleasure both feel in their own way; Will’s slack and flushed, teeth occasionally flashing out to press against his lip before letting go, Hannibal’s eyes closed for the moment, mouth still open against Will’s shoulder in a strangely protective gesture.

As they adjust, Hannibal's eyes lift to meet the reflection as well, and for a moment they are both looking, eyes turned hollow by the reflections in the dark glass but still clear enough to see.

Then Hannibal pulls him back again, changes the angle, and Will’s cry echoes in the space below them.

It’s not gentle, it’s urgent and demanding and necessary, and Will finds himself curling inwards again, back arched upwards before bending back into the curve Hannibal so loves to see, forehead against one arm flat on the railing as he lets his sounds escape him after the initial one. His other hand inches along to rail until he can hook his little finger over Hannibal’s hand, squeezing gently and then not letting go; a strange offer of support in itself. An innocently intimate gesture, completely at odds with the rest of the picture reflected over the dark city.

Turning his mouth against Will's neck, Hannibal opens it but does not close his teeth. He presses his lips there, then closes his eyes again and takes. It's what he needs, perhaps what both of them do. Hannibal doesn't tease or ease up, but when he feels himself getting close, when he has to shift his balance a little on the uneven footing, he reaches down to curl his hand around Will's cock and stroke, fingers tight as how it felt to be inside him, pace as rapid, and then faster as he works to catch Will up. Hannibal seems intent on bringing Will over first, feeling urgently that need to be sure they were both close together this time, impatient that they might for once be on the same page.

When he comes, he's not quite ready for it - his focus is too split, and it feels desperate and clumsy of him, but Will is just there with him, and Hannibal has to let go quickly to get both his hands on the rail and keep his knees from giving out. He lets himself catch his breath and stay still, until he's sure he has the strength to stand on his own, and even then he's reluctant, instead just settling his arms around Will's waist and pulling him up against him as they both straighten their backs when they can stop hanging from the rail.

Will swallows thickly, leaning his head back against Hannibal’s shoulder as he catches his breath and allows his eyes to open again. the apartment is strangely silent after their heavy breathing and Will’s delicious noises. They stay that way a moment, until Will can feel Hannibal seek the rail behind him to balance on and he takes his weight off the man, leaning down to pull his pants past his ankles before standing properly.

His hands fumble with the buttons of his shirt and he leaves it open, cuffs still done, before turning to Hannibal fully and stepping closer to kiss him. now that he can, now that his neck isn’t at an awkward angle and the barrier of desperation isn’t there, he takes his time, brings one hand up to rest against the side of Hannibal’s face as he opens his mouth to it and feels the other man respond.

It’s a reassuring kiss, nothing more, and then Will steps back, hand pressing lightly against Hannibal’s chest, before he climbs the rest of the stairs to their bedroom.

Hannibal is just behind, his eyes still dark, but his expression has returned to composure. Briefly, he considers retrieving the discarded straps - belt and collar both - from the floor below. He decides not to, and leaves them for the morning. The leather of the collar was slowly going soft with age and use, he'd noticed, but was still stark black and nearly polished, a handsome dark slash to draw the eye to Will's throat. Hannibal lets the thought sit and heads into the bathroom to clean up briefly, aware of Will moving behind him.

Will takes his time to fold his pants carefully, to undo the cuffs and hang the shirt over the back of a chair. He doesn’t look at Hannibal as he peels back the covers on the bed and crawls in, groaning gently at how good it feels to stretch his body out of something so soft and familiar. He keeps his eyes closed, almost as though he’s asleep already, until Hannibal joins him, and for a change, Will pulls the man into his arms and not the other way around.

“Tell me,” he murmurs, and shifts to rest his chin on the back of his hand on Hannibal’s chest, blinking his eyes open and watching the man in the semi-darkness of the room.

Hannibal settles his arms around Will as the other settles onto him. He looks fairly sleepy himself, quieted now, but he can see that Will is awake and unwilling to let it drop, and Hannibal knows it affects them both equally. He pulls Will more fully atop him, so he can push his fingers alongside Will's spine and ease some of the oncoming soreness out of the man's back.

"There is a list of thirty four hundred names in my safe," Hannibal confides. "A thousand families."

He waits for the information to penetrate, waits to see if William will judge him for it, and how. He has never openly admitted his business to the man, even after his trial. Hannibal has

held some measure of trust back in ownership, but he has threatened his own ability to maintain it with this. Will deserves some honesty. Perhaps because he had softened some due to the influence Will had on him, else he never would have taken the risk at all.

He continues vaguely, but suspects Will can follow him well enough. It is their open secret. "I used funds that weren't intended for rescue," he continues. "And Europe has become unsafe for anyone different... there is a lot of blame to lay and it is laying hardest on some shoulders."

Will listens, quiet, doesn't move in more than gentle tilt into Hannibal's touches as the man speaks. He can tell it's taking effort, not only to tell Will but also what he is telling him. Will has followed the news as closely as anyone can here, through the newspapers, through the radio – he keeps it on during the day, filling the apartment with echoing words as he meanders from room to room or works in the kitchen – and he knows only as much as anyone else: very little.

But the number, the way Hannibal says it gives Will pause. It's not just a ledger of acquisitions, these families don't go to the business like the records of people Will had found before the trial. It sends chills through Will's blood like nothing has for a long time, and for a while he just searches Hannibal's face for answers, asks no questions of his own.

Hannibal sighs, lifts his hands into Will's hair and settles his fingers through it gently. "This time, it can be a mistake. No further mistakes will be tolerated. Our choice is this - stay where we are and be very, very careful, or retire. I would surrender power, but cease to be a threat - we could go to Nantuxent and be forgotten. Forget, as long as the war doesn't touch us here."

The other side of the coin is plain, too - they could stay and still have the chance to reach out if they could hide it. But it was a very long fall if they were ever caught. And as bad for Hannibal as it was, William's threat was twofold - a loss of protection and a lot of vindictive memory.

Will's eyes widen a little and his heart rate picks up. this is an ultimatum. Not pushed on him, not sprung on him, but there, and very final. And it terrifies him that Hannibal is offering Will the chance to have the final word. And in a way it angers him, because he knows, just as Hannibal does, that he can't in good conscience turn away from something like this. He had taken a man he cared deeply for to trial because his conscience would not allow him to pretend he had found no evidence. He had ruined both their lives for months because he hadn't been able to silence his conscience.

But it's also surprising that Hannibal even offers this as a choice, and doesn't explain to Will that they're leaving. He has conscience enough himself, and it's that that eats away at the man on nights like these, it's that that makes him lash out seeking a way to stifle it or silence it.

"How many could we save?" he asks, head already ringing with the possibility of the numbers he would need to manipulate, if Hannibal allows him near the books again. Will had kept Lecter's business completely legal when he had been his accountant, he had

masqueraded every transaction as another, had put assets aside in places that did not exist. At the time he had been bagged and taken away, Hannibal's books were immaculate.

Hannibal does not need to preface his response with a qualifier - just as Hannibal had always known someday Will would find something and know, have that hold on him, the answer to this must always depend on the answer to 'before they caught us?'.

"Perhaps one," he answers honestly. "Perhaps a hundred." Or many more, if they were just careful enough. Even so they would have to sit down and behave themselves now for a long time, while eyes were on them - and it would be hard to see the opportunities go by and know they could not take them. It would be a constant balance of what could be brought now against what they might bring later, if they could just be careful and patient.

"But likely not ourselves," he warns, again. Possibly without requirement, but he has to be sure that William understands. He settles his fingers along Will's neck on either side, pushing his thumbs up under the man's chin gently as he leans forward to kiss him, and tries to offer at least once, a way for both of them out. "Nantuxent isn't so bad in the winter. The hearth is large, and the water at the edge of the harbour freezes."

Will closes his eyes as Hannibal kisses him, and reciprocates in kind. He could say no, he could agree to live in a house by the sea with a retired mob boss and his dog, he could live out however long either of them had left in comfort, pretend there was no war.

But Hannibal had already saved one thousand families. His entire business boomed with such numbers, and he had passed the shipment off as an error, had gotten the spotlight swung his way because of it. Will's mouth curves in a smile, but it's not one of acceptance. Nantuxent can wait.

"I have good memories of it in summer." He says instead, his implication just as clear. When he rests against Hannibal this time, his eyes don't leave him. he wonders at the man's change of heart but doesn't ask. He guesses well enough.

"What am I allowed to do?" he asks.

"Help me," Hannibal asks. He was careful with his books, but his time was divided. And he means not only on that front. Hannibal traces his fingers along where the collar usually rests, with all the protection it implies. He will need someone to watch his back for this. He is turning on his usual allies, and in his line of work having more than one set is unlikely.

"Be patient while I make amends, and then keep it invisible," he says - and that's no small task. Someone, somewhere would notice. And the difficulty would be that they would have to continue to do what Hannibal had always done - enough to mask their efforts, to keep profit in it. He strokes his fingers along Will's spine again.

He had done his part protecting Will to this point - now they would need to protect each other, and be damn careful not to be seen doing it. Hannibal smiles, but it is very small. "Spend summer in Nantuxent with me."

Will smiles, ducks his head lightly to press his lips to Hannibal's chest, draw the soft pressure down the middle of his body, bends so he can drag them down to his navel before sitting up and over the man.

"And every summer after, I suppose." He murmurs, drawing his hands back up, curling gently over Hannibal's neck. For a moment they don't talk at all, barely move, one watching the other, letting the gravity of the situation settle over them. Then Will's lips press lightly together in thought and he shifts gently, knees on either side of Hannibal.

"I'll take a look at the books tomorrow." He says, "See how much I can rearrange and what we'll need to lie about."

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

> *“Something changed.” Will says, standing up and flicking off the light to stop himself returning to work before dinner. But Hannibal’s demeanor suggests something he heard on the radio was not something he wanted to hear. More so than usual.*

Chapter Notes

> Apologies for the late posting!! It completely slipped my mind, but it's up now and hopefully worth the extra day of waiting

It takes time for Hannibal to regain the good graces of his peers and superiors - not that he has many, but enough to leave him on unstable footing. There are many who would like to take his place, and he has made enough mis-steps that are visible that perhaps others have forgotten some of his effectiveness.

For two months he does nothing but behave, into the depths of winter - through Christmas, where he must throw a bright, big party and William must appear and play his part perfectly as well, the evidence of Hannibal's ire. He serves drinks in his collar, with his eyes scraping the ground and his shirt unbuttoned to reveal it and leave the rest of the horrors visited upon him to imagination. No one touches him, save Hannibal - slow and sweet after the party has ended and they settle amidst the unsettling disarray in Hannibal's apartment, retreating upstairs where the order and Will both can soothe Hannibal's frayed nerves against the small army of abandoned glassware threatening rings on his every surface.

It works well. It carries them forward into January, and nearly to February. Hannibal has the radio on as he works dinner, an expensive thing which hooks into a large set of antennas at the roof of the building. He has always found international news of utmost importance to his work, and now streams a tirade of impassioned German between the softer voices of the British reporters, as Hannibal chops carrots.

The sound of the knife impacting the cutting board stops, and his head turns toward the radio, and though his expression remains mild, his mouth twitches. Too soon, he can't do anything about it yet - but there is fast coming a point where he must engage the risk again, or the time will have passed. The speech terminates in violent anger, met with passionate applause, and Hannibal flicks the radio off.

When he sets dinner, he finds Will hasn't come into the room yet - and he knows he'll find the man pouring over the books still. The thought makes him pause - they have always worked well in the same space. They have never quite worked together before, never for the same goal - they were always working at odds and pretending. This is the first time they are truly united - though Hannibal cannot quite say he has won by swaying William over to him that far.

They have swayed each other.

"Come to dinner," he suggests, leaning in the doorway as he watches Will at the desk.

Will makes a non-committal sound and adds another note to the paper in front of him. over the months since Hannibal has told him, Will has carefully been adjusting the books. Not skimming so much as setting aside. He had been told to wait, to not rush, to calm down. But he had thrown himself into the work with a vigor, going to bed late when he was asked to, reminded to. He no longer left the apartment at ungodly hours.

He is used to the radio playing during the day in multiple languages, languages he doesn't understand, the harsh tones of German, the lilting tones of French, other languages he can't even name. he's used to Hannibal listening carefully, tilting his head but never saying much. Turning off the radio at night before they both go upstairs. The apartment has become simultaneously louder and quieter since the war has started. Company has become rarer but no less taxing on them both.

He turns to Hannibal after a moment, pencil behind his ear in a moment of distraction, and blinks.

"Something changed." He says, standing up and flicking off the light to stop himself returning to work before dinner. But Hannibal's demeanor suggests something he heard on the radio was not something he wanted to hear. More so than usual.

"The Furher has become a Prophet," Hannibal answers mildly, in a flat tone that clearly expresses how little he thinks of the whole idea. He cannot quite bring himself to understand the desperation of the situation in Germany, but he has begun to see the effects. He looks up at Will as the other approaches.

"He has found a way to enact his idea of purification by laying the blame on the least popular people, blaming ethnicity and religion instead of the failures of treaties and alliances," Hannibal sighs, and turns away, trusting Will to follow, and they both sit quiet at dinner.

Hannibal is no saint. He is not sure he has a right to judge - so he does his best not to. They will need to be prepared to do what they can. He looks at Will, takes in the tired set of his back, the darkness beneath his eyes.

"If they catch us," he says, tearing his eyes away and looking forward instead, out the window. "It will be worse than the first time."

"You say that every week." Will replies, but his smile has grown smaller every time they have this conversation. It will be bad, it will be dangerous, and he doubts he'll see the depths

of the bathhouse if he's bagged and dragged away this time. He doesn't want to think about the things he'll see instead. He doesn't want to think about the fact that he may not see Hannibal.

He picks at his dinner and finds himself suddenly not hungry. But he refuses to let Hannibal's cooking go to waste. He reaches for his wine instead and leans back to savor it.

"I think it every day," Hannibal answers, and he pushes his food once too, just once, folding the thin slice of ham back against itself, watching the meat flex and ooze juice, the contrast between the dark skin and the cooked, pink meat. Then he stops toying and forces himself to divide it into bite sized pieces with intersections of his knife as Will continues.

"You scheduled another shipment." It's not a statement so much as a confirmation, "The very beginning of March. Same number as before. There is nothing on the books to suggest anyone knows where the people you bring in end up, you've made it clear you run this part of the business alone."

He licks his lips and taps the glass gently with a forefinger before setting it down on the table and sliding his fingers pensively up and down the stem of the glass, thinking less of how it looks and more that it's something repetitive he can concentrate on.

"We can hide perhaps half, falsify the paperwork, have it on record, but never follow up. the half you keep will hold your business legitimate, they can be checked on they can be followed." He grimaces, knowing where most of them end up, turning his head quickly to the kitchen and back, a reflex when he remembers where he had ended up. "I just don't know what we can do with the rest."

"In order for the opportunity to continue to exist," Hannibal agrees, his voice distant and clinical. Just business - it's the only way to get this done. "The operation must continue to always be lucrative. It is only when they don't make as much money as they expected that they ask questions. Ideally, we can always turn a higher profit - I know, Will."

He can sense the tension, and Will's face is drawing toward distaste. Hannibal had always saved a few with those he led in to... not save. Only recently had he turned that into the purpose. "If we can turn a higher profit than expected, they will look less and less. As far as what to do with them when they are here... I can get them out of the city, beyond that they must do what they can with what they have."

Hannibal pushes his plate away. "At least they will have a chance."

Will nods, a stuttered movement, before he takes up his glass again and empties it.

"There's only so much I can hide." He tells him. it's not a laying of blame, it's a laying of facts, just as Hannibal had presented his. He knows what business Hannibal runs, he had entered the FBI knowing the man's dealings, had taken the assignment hoping to put an end to them. And now he was here, by his design as well as circumstances, helping the man extend his business further.

Fate is not without a sense of irony.

Will doesn't mention that most of the people they get out of the city will not get far. They will have no paperwork, no record of their arrival, nothing beyond the clothes on their back and their lives for the time being. He feels the guilt press against his chest at the thought that they could get them so far and then no further. But he knows it's not their job, not their responsibility. That the only reason this is happening is because they have the means – if carefully adjusted – and a conscience.

"You haven't eaten much." He comments quietly. he deliberately doesn't look down at his own plate, still half full with a beautifully prepared and presented meal. They're both too high strung, exhausted, stressed.

"It will be just as good cold," Hannibal suggests. He has eaten the one bite, which is highly unusual. He enjoys preparing food, and the natural result is that he enjoys eating it as well. But he glances at Will's, and sighs.

"We'll kill ourselves this way just the same," Hannibal observes, and he pulls his plate back. If they don't eat or sleep, they're certain to make mistakes. Will continues in silence, more pushing his food with his fork than eating, and Hannibal straightens his back. He is worried that they aren't doing enough, counterpoint to Hannibal.

"You can get far with a willingness to work and the ability to see opportunities," he assures Will. "America is a very gentle country."

By comparison to some, anyway. Hannibal spears a few candied carrots and then considers. "If we had another property... on the other coast."

It's an idle musing. His superiors were unlikely to check the results there, so as long as Hannibal could produce the money, their efforts would be less policed. It would, however, be difficult to keep tabs on the operation themselves. Likely to get messy, unless they could be sure the staff there was properly motivated. Hannibal glances up, to see if Will can connect a line between points.

Will's eyes flick up a moment and he studies Hannibal carefully. The man is manipulative, no longer turning his charms on for Will, but he is an expert liar, an expert in getting what he wants from people who work for him and those who don't. the suggestion is a subtle one but one that sets Will's jaw to tighten a moment.

"They'd be in more danger than we would." He murmurs, but he is thinking about it, having people work in a place that doesn't exist, for a cause that isn't listed is safer than sending most of them out into America proper with nothing to fall back on. It would obviously need to be carefully tracked, people selected rigorously, but it could work. Would certainly take some pressure off of Hannibal and Will keeping tabs on everything that is going on. Because it was just Hannibal and Will, there was no one else.

"But I doubt their loyalty would need to be bought." He adds quietly, eyes sliding away from Hannibal's a moment to meditate just over his shoulder before returning. "Of the people you brought over, the last shipment. How many are in Philadelphia?"

"Not many," Hannibal admits. They had spread out, wisely, and by his direction. Some had gone north, even as far as Canada, and others west. It would be easier to find labor in the growing states - migrant workers were hardly spared a second glance there, even these days. The world was still recovering from the Great War, barely anyone thought about Immigrants with hopes and designs on the American Dream. "But perhaps a few."

It would be difficult to ask after them. Harder still to make contact, unless he was very careful. Hannibal passes his tongue over his lower lip. "It would be better if I didn't seem to interested in them. And they know you, Will."

Every so often, he still got phone calls while Will was out, reminders that eyes were on them. He could assert his control to a point, but not if his motives were drawn into question again. Hannibal exhales slowly and stands, gathering his plate and Will's. The situation was difficult for both of them. He settles their dinner into the preservative containers and then into the icebox.

"At times I miss the freedom," he admits, as a sudden longing washes through him to simply gather Will up, send him upstairs to dress his finest, and take him to the opera to forget their troubles for a few hours, at least. He had traded freedom at first for possession, and now he's on entirely new footing, uncertain what the end result is. It would raise too many questions to be seen out on the town with someone who was supposed to exist in perpetual punishment. It should raise too many in himself.

Will watches him as he works in the kitchen, refraining this evening from standing up to help. But he listens. He watches the way Hannibal’s shoulders tense, the way his voice shifts to another tone, a softer one, contemplative. He feels his own expression soften.

What were they? One man a murderer, a trader of souls to turn a profit, the other a deserter, perhaps not by his own hand, but he has still not left Hannibal’s side, even with the freedoms he now had. They are trapped in an endless loop, the two of them, getting closer and closer but still not quite touching, not quite in sync. Will feels the familiar tug knowing he can’t push it, can’t push them to meet, has to wait. Wonders if the feeling that quiets Hannibal’s voice is similar.

“The freedom?” he asks after a moment, finally getting up from the table to take their glasses to the kitchen as well. He stands by the sink and lets the water warm against his hand before rinsing the glasses carefully, setting them rim-down against the counter.

"When you were mine to show," Hannibal admits, but his tone is mild. As possessive as he is, as vindictive and ruthless as he can be, he is still at least partially human. "Instead of simply mine to be seen."

The distinction is not as fine as it sounds - they both live it. Hannibal watches Will wash the glasses, and wonders if perhaps they wouldn't have been better served by second helpings of wine. Perhaps not on an empty stomach.

Hannibal extends his hand toward Will, and he seems pleased that Will comes when he does so. "I never got to ask if you enjoyed Cosi Fan Tutte," he muses. Perhaps because their night beyond had changed to strict business. A suitable test, an orchestration of a different sort.

William had looked good in his suit, at least, Hannibal recalls with some pride. He takes a deep breath, pulling Will against his side and looking out the window at the city below.

It is cold enough to warrant a fire in the hearth upstairs, perhaps.

Will smiles and rests against the man as he's pulled; a familiar motion and a comfortable one. He doesn't often think of the night in Chicago, he tends to recall the latter part of it rather than the initially good beginning. Regardless, he remembers.

"It's something I decided then I could get a taste for if my appetite was fed enough." he says honestly. Opera isn't something that touches him quite as deeply as it touches Hannibal, but it's not an art form he is prepared to simply toss away as 'disliked' without experiencing it further. He doubts he'll get to. Not for years. Not until his 'punishment' is seen as being fully served, as being appropriately cruel. He wonders, not for the first time, if in the minds of the people they have this show on for, Will should ever be released, or if they imagine Hannibal will keep him until boredom forces Will's release.

Off the docks in the harbour, feet entrenched in cement.

"I wonder if there isn't a way to feed your appetite," Hannibal answers, amused, but he doesn't miss the sobering of Will's expression into thoughtfulness, and then back to working. Hannibal sighs, and waits for Will to continue.

"With the next shipment," he murmurs after a moment, turning a little to still be in Hannibal's arms but now facing him instead, "Contact those who are still missing family. See if you can get them into positions we need filled. Love is a strong motivator." He presses his lips together, hating the way manipulation tastes there, but it's inevitable, the only way they will be able to get someone under their employ who will be loyal without pressure, without threat or money. For the greater good.

"I'll set about finding a property. A few. Select the one that will serve our purpose, claim it's a holding dock, send shipments of the whiskey there, store it, have whoever wants to monitor you see it." he sighs gently, drawing his arms around Hannibal loosely. "If we can manage that, by April we can run more people in."

He can cover the need for additional property with the need for further masking. As a method of additional care, and an expansion in anticipation. War tends to make things scarce, so an expansion preparatory was a wise move - better to have the ability to move a larger volume.

Hannibal sighs, and then looks down. "Love is a strong motivator," he agrees, distantly. "I'll get it done. That's enough for tonight, William. Let it rest."

With a soft motion of his hand over Will's back, Hannibal turns from the kitchen. Tonight the sky is dark with clouds and the lights in the city seem to stand out alone in the world, through the faint cold haze that suggests it might snow. Hannibal turns the light out as he leaves the kitchen - with a glance back, he finds Will still thinking there at the window, and he wonders what burdens the man was fighting so hard to make up for.

Upstairs, he finds himself alone, with the faint orange glow of the desk lamp the only thing behind him, and he works to get the fire going, pulling tame logs out of the wrought iron rack and stacking them in place.

The fire is bright and alive when Will finally joins him, Hannibal having settled to doze with his back propped against the edge of the bed, eyes hypnotized by the flames. "Why do you need to save them so badly?" He asks, hearing Will at the top of the stair.

“Because someone saved me once.” He says quietly, not yet moving to undress. The room is warmer than downstairs, and will get more so as the fire burns longer and rests to embers. “After I’d tried to end them.”

He rubs his eyes. maybe it’s his feeling of closure, that he has to do something right since his initial assignment failed so spectacularly. Maybe it’s because this is a war he knows he’ll remember, beyond shadows and cold evenings and hunger, he’ll remember it for the death toll, for what he could have done and didn’t.

“Because it will matter?” he sighs, stopping next to Hannibal and gently running a hand through his hair, watching the man’s eyes open and slide up to look at him properly.

“Why did you save the ones you did?” he turns the question around, “A thousand families that you set free. Why.”

Hannibal reaches up and slides his hand behind Will's knee in return, settling it comfortably there. "War is a bad place for families. Small men become monsters, and they band together and kill greater ones."

He shakes his head. "Because I was set free, once." It hadn't mattered by the time he was, he was already locked halfway between the small man's monster and the great man's reserve. The corner of his mouth upturns. "I thought you would approve."

Pulling sharply at the back of Will's knee until it folds, Hannibal steals Will's balance only to catch him - as much as Will gracelessly catches himself on the way down, and pull him closer. "It may not reassure you to know that a similar history created me, but it assures me that there will eventually be someone to take my place."

Will eases down, after the initial jolt that set him falling, straddling Hannibal’s lap comfortably as he listens. He thought Will would approve. He thinks back to the first time he’d worn his collar by choice, to how the evening had ended, how he’d asked why Hannibal had not considered doing something else, ‘retiring’ and leaving the business while it had still been safe to, and how the man had asked what else he could do.

He isn’t sure if the man remembers, it had been a murmured conversation in a hot bath, but the fact remains that at some point the thought had passed through his head of ‘Will would approve’.

He doesn’t comment on Hannibal’s history. He supposes the man won’t want to discuss it, though he is curious to ask. Maybe another time, maybe when Hannibal is willing to volunteer information on his own.

“Powerful men come and go, regardless of circumstances.” He murmurs, leaning closer to just press his cheek against Hannibal’s in a soft, familiar gesture, “If someone eventually takes your place, let it be years after today, and due to retirement.”

Hannibal settles his arms around the one person he's ever wanted to possess so badly he had allowed himself to be owned in return. Powerful men come and go - he had never sought permanence, only to do what he could with what he had.

What he could do was a lot, it so happened. What he had - even now - was comparatively little. Simple. Until Will, uncomplicated. Hannibal settles his arms around Will's waist, and feels the heat of the fire soak into his skin and Will's shirt, and hopes it will be as many years later as Will thinks.

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It is not until the middle of March he begins to worry in earnest. If Will had been determined to get the first shipment through here on the East Coast, there was no comparison to how he felt about the second. Hannibal knows it was a mistake, now, to let Will talk him into seeing the first load ashore - just to see what it was they were working for, he had assured Hannibal. To see the relief from growing horror spread bright on their faces, even when all they had to comfort them was absolute uncertainty.

Will is hell-bent, now. He has chased properties in Washington, Oregon, and California, and accounted for every penny he could scrape from the books. If Hannibal must go and socialize and smile, and assure everyone of their profits and that everything would work out lucratively, he never arrives home to find Will doing anything but suffering through another review of the books, tracking another of their rescues down to try and get them to Oregon, scraping himself raw on the project like he was daring it to consume him.

Hannibal stands in the doorway between the kitchen and his study, and draws a deep breath, reminds - as gently as he can. "It will be worse for us if they catch us, this time." And without sleep, he would be sure to make errors.

Will closes his eyes, jaw working, but he doesn’t let his frustration boil over, doesn’t shoot it at Hannibal. It’s not his fault. It’s his doing, this entire dangerous set up to get people free, without Hannibal it wouldn’t exist, no matter how much Will may have wanted it to. So he brings a hand up to rub his eyes, to just press against them, and push back his anger and frustration, settle his exhaustion, ignore the way his hands are shaking when he blinks and looks up again.

“And worse still tomorrow.” He confirms, giving the man a small smile. The radio had not heralded good news this morning when Will had turned the familiar dials. Hitler had entered Austria to much celebration. More and more of Europe was falling to the man on their knees willingly and it terrified him. America had made no claim of help, but on top of everything, Will was terrified that when they called for the army, the letter would find its way to him.

Hannibal nods, but he does not move from his position, still watching Will intently. He seems expectant, waiting for the other to finally surrender under his gaze. William doesn't - not without continuing his train of thought aloud.

“I need…” he frowns, shaking his head, and sets the pen down, “We need to contact Mazzer. He can run the process in Oregon, he’s waiting for his daughter. She was in the same town, we can try for another shipment there.” He swallows, can feel the way Hannibal’s brows furrow a little as he watches him. But he has worked so hard to get this off the ground, they are flawless, not a single record off the books, nothing suspicious, and Will has kept it that way.

“What?” he asks finally, tone tired, and turns to Hannibal fully.

"Boats against the current," Hannibal observes, thinking of some distant memory of an era when he still had free time enough to remain well read. "Borne back ceaselessly."

He takes a deep breath, and arches his eyebrows, but it becomes clear quickly that William does not realize the point, cannot quite see what Hannibal is seeing - Will pounding himself against the issue until he was worn and thin and threatening to pound apart.

"You work at this as if the devil himself were your taskmaster," Hannibal observes, and he moves at last, reaches out and takes the book from under Will's pen, marks his page with the ribbon, and closes it. "I worry that it will come to own you. You feel guilty already for every name that you can't accept - soon it will be for every name you don't even see. Will, you need distance from this to do it."

Will makes a frustrated sound but doesn’t deny Hannibal is right. He is close to this, he does feel guilty. He feels guilty that they can’t take the entire population of people targeted and get them away. He feels guilty when he knows which of the people arriving are not in this country for freedom. He feels guilty that he makes that happen.

“How can I distance myself from this?” he asks, and it sounds harsher than it should, he’s scared. Fear makes him rude. “How do you manage to?”

He gives Hannibal an angry look and pushes away from the table to make his way out into the main room. It’s not yet dark, but they have the lights on in the loft and kitchen regardless. He’s tired, his hands shake as though he’s angling for a fight, or just come out of one. He doesn’t want to do this, he wonders if maybe he should have chosen Nantuxent, and gets angry at the thought.

“What if it does come to own me, what then?” he asks, turning to watch Hannibal follow him at a gentle pace, “Would it be so bad?”

Hannibal weathers the storm with his usual mildness, until he sees Will's exhausted shaking, and still the man turns on him to fight for the right to continue throwing himself mercilessly at this until it destroys him or he conquers it. Of the two of them, Hannibal knows which is the certainty - especially at this pace.

His eyes go hard - the anger is directed inward, for letting things get this far out of his hands and control. His hold, his chokingly tight grip on every aspect was all that had kept them both together - him out of jail, and William alive. From the start, Hannibal had been in control. Now, when he let slip his grasp, he found that the slope was dangerously steep.

"I own you," he corrects instead, eyes flat and dark. The words are blunt and unkind, but all they mask is worry. "Forgetting that will end badly."

Will's eyes harden in answer but he refrains from saying more. They are both pulled so taut even small words without thought bring them close to snapping.

"Of course." He says instead, raising his eyes to the ceiling a moment to study the rafters, lips pressing together before he shrugs and returns his gaze downwards.

He steps past Hannibal to walk to the stairs but he doesn't climb them, just rubs one hand over his face and stands there, at the foot of them, putting himself back together. He knows he needs to get out of this. He knows he needs to step away, perhaps even for a full day, to just clear his mind and settle his nerves. Keep the radio off, stay in bed, read a book. Perhaps leave the apartment to walk, breathe fresh air again.

He suddenly, painfully, misses Winston.

"You haven't asserted that for a while." He says after a long pause. He doesn't turn yet, he knows Hannibal hasn't moved much closer, composing himself where he stayed just as Will had been doing. In certain regards they are so dangerously similar. "Ownership."

His tone isn't goading, he isn't out for a fight, not anymore. They're both too tired, he's walked off his frustration even in the little space between the kitchen and the stairs. But he is honestly asking. It has been months since he's owned Will. They've been too busy for anything beyond hot kisses and quick fingers for weeks now; since their relationship had started it's the longest they've gone, and Will, for one, misses the closeness.

Hannibal is quiet for a long time. He doesn't point out that William had come to bed so late and gotten out of it so early the last few weeks that Hannibal would have had to take his opportunities on the desk or nowhere at all. It would never have stopped him before, he realizes, it was just worry, agitation, stress. It killed his drive, and focused his determination.

With a start, he realizes he'd fallen into an old habit - he hadn't felt this way, so quieted inside and so utterly in control of his own emotions since before William had come into his life. He had not even needed regular Wednesday appointments before then. There had been only forward momentum. Hannibal stops the train of thought when he realizes he has transformed Will into himself - as he had always intended - in fact he has changed them both into him, two years back in time.

He discovers he doesn't care for the taste of it, now that he has it.

"Isn't it strange how we've united in purpose and grown farther apart," he observes, and moves at last. He extends one hand to the length of his arm and closes his hand over the back of Will's neck. He has not asserted ownership for a while - he has been so certain of it and so distracted he hadn't even celebrated not needing to. He lets the weight of his hand settle warm at Will's neck.

"Are you suggesting I need to?"

Will sighs, rolling his head back against the gesture with a quiet sound. He doesn't need to prove ownership in the sense that Will demands it reminded, but he misses the way, even before Christmas, that Hannibal would take what he wanted. With enough gentleness to allow retaliation or negotiation but taking. Will can wind him up, he can tease and drive him to frustration, but even for that he has been too tired. Too distracted. And that's the problem.

"I know who I belong to." Will assures him, resting his head back far enough to be able to regard Hannibal carefully through half-closed eyes over his shoulder. He sighs and blinks slowly.

"We were united in purpose before." He reminds him, a small smile ghosting his features before he looks forward again and turns, keeping Hannibal's hand against his skin, "You were determined to mold me to your image. Your golden boy. And I was determined to bring you down." He presses his lips together, "I really hope that this endeavour is more successful than our last."

He regards Hannibal before tilting his head to the side a little, feeling Hannibal's hand there, and stepping away and past him again. it would happen or it wouldn't, in a way it didn't matter. They had been so long in this dance that Will knew, in a distant sort of way, that Hannibal cared for him, that even if it wasn't blatantly shown or voiced, that it was there. That in itself was strange, considering who they both were.

Hannibal finds himself trapped, stuck at a loss. He feels suddenly, deeply exhausted. He does not often find himself emotional enough that he would feel this desperately scraped bare. He watches Will ascend, pull away with almost indifference to what happened or didn't and not even the desire to push or tease, and his eyes stay dark as he sorts it out within. There is a distinct sting.

Hannibal does not join him until he has let it go from within. Instead, when his calm returns, he follows then, and settles heavily in bed behind Will. It feels safer to seek the distance again, while Will is trying to shake himself apart. Hannibal settles an arm over him, insinuates the other between Will's side and the mattress and pulls him close as if he won't let go until he's satisfied the man won't come apart.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

> *“It will be worse for us if they catch us, now.” Will murmurs, eyes hollow and staring at nothing. “And they will. We have two shipments scheduled. One is out of Poland.”*
>
> September, 1939. Britain declares war on Germany. The penultimate chapter. Magically, both plot and porn.

Chapter Notes

> Tensionnnnnnn!
>
> Also, some characters from way back when, come to say hi. Enjoy, darlings, just one more little epilogue to go next week <3

There are two mugs steaming on the counter when Hannibal comes downstairs.

Will is standing stock still, eyes fixed on the radio, hair still a dishevelled mess of curls from how he’d slept. It’s not loud, he’d kept it low as he’d make coffee, anticipating Hannibal to still be sleeping, but it’s intelligible enough. Will’s jaw works and he swallows hard, expression one of genuine inescapable fear. The last time Hannibal had seen that expression he had pulled Will to his feet, filthy and exhausted, with his jacket draped over his shoulders before Will had insinuated himself into his arms and held on.

Will turns briefly to watch Hannibal, to let the man know he’s seen him, before his eyes return to the radio, thumb gently turning the volume up, filling their kitchen with a British broadcast.

“We are at war with Germany.” Is repeated, facts and invasions revisited and explained, but for Will it’s enough. he takes up his cup from the counter and brings it to his lips for a slow sip. He holds it left-handed, his right wrist still bound up with a soft bandage, keeping the thing in place. He’d worked it to the point of agonizing nerve spasms with the amount of work he did by hand. It had been enough of a wake up call to slow his progress, to step back.

“It will be worse for us if they catch us, now.” Will murmurs, eyes hollow and staring at nothing. “And they will. We have two shipments scheduled. One is out of Poland.”

Hannibal hesitates on the threshold, standing in the doorway of the kitchen and listening to the accented voice repeat the information. It was soon now, if America had learned any lesson from the first time the world had gone to war with itself. If they hadn't, a little longer, but still soon.
Hannibal reaches absently for his coffee, calm in the face of their news.

"Are we ready?" he asks, and then hisses as the coffee proves too hot, sets it aside. They are not ready, not for everything. No one could possibly be. He starts forward, impacts something soft at his knees and looks down to find Winston sitting at his legs and looking up. His fur has started to lengthen again, after the close clip he'd gotten to help survive the city's summer. They'd had no time for the Nantuxent house this year, so Hannibal had compromised.

He lets his hand fall to the soft crown of the dog's head, understanding the look of worry that's directed up at him. They could go now, get out of the city and go as far as possible, but he knows they will not. William will want to see this finished, and in a way, Hannibal has resigned himself to it. So instead he asks, "When do they come?"

“Eighth,” Will replies, “For the first. Tenth the second.” He sets his coffee aside and rubs his eyes.

“Washington is ready for one of them, I haven’t had contact with California. I need to follow up.”

They had managed three more shipments between April and now, all over the country, people dispersed and saved by the hundreds. The books are still clean, just as carefully maintained, and the efficiency has proven enough that they could schedule more at regular intervals. And then Europe had finally blown.

“I don’t know what else to do.” He says, shrugging to try and pass the words off as indifferent. They’re far from it. these are people, real people, and real lives. These could potentially be the last people they manage to save, Will would not have it fail.

"We'll do what we can to make sure they're autonomous after the 8th. There's no way for them to know what we're doing until it arrives, and they can't act fast enough to shut us down after two days," Hannibal soothes, his mind working plans in the meantime. They had to be ready to minimize people on hand to the barest amount, and then they had to get the second one and get out. "They're good enough they can get themselves out the same time."

“I’m scared.” Will admits, biting the inside of his lip before directing his eyes to Hannibal a moment. His tone doesn’t waver, just stays flat and quiet and absolutely genuine. Will has never felt so helpless and so responsible.

"Everyone in their right mind is scared," Hannibal assures him, and then moves toward him at last, pushing his hand gently down the center of the man's back in a reassuring line, before he pulls him close. "We'll get this done, and then we'll have to go."

If they can make it that far, it's further than he expected. "You've done what you could, let it rest."

Will goes, a small sound escaping him, and just leans against Hannibal, lending the man his weight, taking the support offered. He thinks back to how angry Hannibal had gotten that Will was getting too involved in this, that he was losing himself, that eventually he would start to fill himself with guilt over the fact that he couldn't save everyone. That they only saved a few hundred. He thinks that he's right, that it will eat at him for a long, long time.

"We could've done more." he says gently, but there's no strength behind it, he knows they could have, and he also knows that what they have done is a lot with the amount of work it took, with how successful it has been. He knows that for that 'insignificant number' he believes the shipments to have been, their work and intervention means the world. It means life. He just has to remind himself of that.

No matter how much one does, there is always more. In this case, they had done what they could do while trying to bank ahead and continue doing more. They had invested - and perhaps brought back twice the returns they would have if they had simply dived in. He doesn't argue against it, he just holds Will a little tighter, before he reaches out to change the station on the radio. He turns the knob until music plays, low, and then turns Will in his arms and kisses him.

It's a distraction, a cheap one perhaps, but effective. He smooths his hands over Will's back, against his neck, strokes fingers under his chin - as if to commit this all to memory, before Winston is nosing his way between their knees again and Hannibal makes a sound of protest at the threat of fur.

"Don't think about it," Hannibal requests. "We have five days. Don't think about it today."

Will hums quietly and nods, dropping his hand to gently coax Winston more towards him than Hannibal. The girl who usually walks him is running late, but he supposes that's excusable, if she's following the news. It still annoys him that he can't walk his own dog, can't go for a much-needed run with him because it would be too dangerous. Punishment did not involve pets and recreation, not for Will Graham.

"Then what do I think about?" he asks instead, offering a small but genuine smile. Hannibal has a meeting, perhaps why he's dressed already at such an early hour, but afterward, his ledger has no entries. By the time he gets home, William will be going out of his mind; having no records to check of people to follow up on will leave him with little more to do than read, sleep, or take a long bath to relax. He's thoroughly convinced the latter is a bad idea as he'll be wont to slide under the water and not come out again.

Restlessness does not sit well on Will, it makes him angry and unpredictable. He supposes he could walk, but that, too, would not lead to good places.

Reaching for him, Hannibal curls his hands behind Will's elbows and pull him close, though they both have to lean over Winston to get there. He does not kiss Will yet - simply turns his cheek against Will's, closes his fingers firm and possessive over the skin beneath them.

Hannibal turns his mouth against Will's ear, "Think about what I will do to you when I get home," he suggests, in a low tone that promises much. "I will leave you very little space to think about it, then."

He reaches up, traces his hands along the backs of Will's arms to his shoulders, and then down where he curls his fingers around the man's wrists in indicative circles. "We will both be so restless it will be that or tear each other apart. Wait, and I'll help you forget."

It's likely to sit as badly on Hannibal's shoulders, the knowledge that everything he had carefully constructed was about to fall - and land heavily. They couldn't run yet - not before the last boats in cleared, but the waiting would be hell if they could not fill it.

Will lets his eyes close and allows a shiver to roll his shoulders back. It had been a long time since promises like these. Not for lack of desire, but for lack of time, lack of peace enough to relax into it. Hannibal is right in that something has to happen before they tear themselves apart, or each other. Will curls his bottom lip into his mouth and bites, before letting his eyes open, directed downwards.

“I’ll wait.” He tells him, raising his eyes but not his chin, narrowing them slightly in the closest approximation of a smile he can offer. By the time Hannibal returned, Will would have worked himself raw contacting California, going over the paperwork one more time, resolutely not listening to the radio…

He would walk, he decides, once Winston has been picked up for a walk of his own. He would let out as much anguish and anger into the cool air outside rather than push it on Hannibal in the evening.

Hannibal meets his eyes, and then steps back, without letting go of one of Will's wrists, which he draws up to his mouth, leaving the trace of first a kiss, and then the reminder of his teeth just sharply enough to sting, and then the corners of his own mouth turn up.

It has been too long since they've given themselves anything, and only now are they surrendering because it is otherwise just too much. "How far we have come since we first fooled each other," Hannibal observes, rubbing his thumb over the mark his teeth have left, and then dropping his hand to gently smooth over the crown of Winston's head.

"I won't be late," he assures Will. "The others will be as anxious to take care of what business they can today as I am."

And with that, he takes his leave, swinging his heavy coat onto his shoulders more for effect than weather, and he pauses to glance back. He resists leaving a task for Will. For today, it will wait. Perhaps not through tomorrow, but for today he lets it lay with his promise to distract Will - to distract them both - later.

Will watches him go, bringing his hand up to press his lips against the mark there before clicking his tongue at Winston to follow him and leaving the kitchen.

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The phonecalls are tedious, mostly waiting for any sort of information to show up that either Will or the man on the other end could use. They establish that the routes are still secure, that the cargo meant for the boats is just as negotiated, no change, not yet. It’s early afternoon by

the time Will hangs up, running his hands through his hair and closing his eyes to force his heart slower.

No change, not yet.

Abigail had come to collect Winston when Will had been on the phone, waving weakly to him as Will had waved first before tapping her thigh to lead Winston away. She was still out, probably distracting herself with the dog as much as Will was about to be with his walk. He makes his way upstairs to shower, luxuriating in the hot water before taking his time to dry himself off.

Abigail returns with Winston as Will is doing up the collar of his shirt over the other collar and he calls from upstairs to thank her. she takes her fee, tells him she'll be by the next day or call if circumstances prevent it, and leaves. Will takes the rest of his clothes – his tie, waistcoat, shoes and jacket – to the lower floor to have Winston meander around him as he gets ready.

One of the more amusing conditions Hannibal had set when they had brought Winston here from Nantuxent was that he not venture upstairs. It had taken a few weeks of training, but Will had stuck to the rule fast, but he always kept himself downstairs if Hannibal wasn't home, so his dog got the company he deserved.

For the most part, it served to keep the dog fur out of the carpeted bedroom and the closet, but failed partially to keep the fur off of the clothes Hannibal was actively wearing. The dog liked him too much, finding something to identify with in the quiet steadiness and willingness to throw the ball across the length of the office for however long it took Winston to grow sick of the game.

Will kneels in front of him now, murmuring soft things and reassurances at the soft muzzle before kissing his just behind the ears and standing up to go. he wraps his scarf around his neck twice, pockets his key, and locks the apartment behind himself.

Outside, the air is colder than it had been that morning. Everything points to an early snow this year, down to the way the air tastes in the early evening. Will's path carries him over old familiar territory, instinctively following an old track that leaves him in front of a familiar old tenement building, and it takes him a moment to realize why it is familiar, his hands tucked in his pockets as he looks up into the face of deja vu.

He realizes that Hannibal used to keep his Wednesday appointments here, at this well-appointed place, and he pauses at how long ago that seems to have been. Looking up, he misses the pair of men exiting the front door, one carrying a box that obscures his field of vision and the other a valise. The first crashes bodily into Will as the other lifts his voice to start to warn him, and the box drops to the sidewalk without, at least, the sound of anything breaking inside.

"Hey, standing in the middle of the sidewalk," The voice is boisterous, loud with irritation, and unmistakably accented. Will scrambles to help him with the suitcase as the long vowels continue in true Chicago style.

"Watch where you're standing, jeez, that coulda been dishes," the man continues, and as Will stabilizes the box with his help, he sees the signs of old damage to the man's right hand, and looks up to meet startlingly blue eyes under a dark fringe of hair and realizes he is seeing a ghost - and far from home at that.

"I don't have any dishes, Jackson," the other man protests, gently, into the ensuing silence.

Will blinks, lips parted in disbelief and shakes his head. This was the man he'd killed. The man who had followed a tip, so long ago, in Chicago, had shown up at the docks, had lied and lost his life for Will to keep his cover. He wasn't here, he couldn't be.

"You were dead," he says very quietly, eyes searching the man's face until he sees some recognition flicker in his eyes as well, "I heard the shot there was… blood on the ground."

Hannibal had led him away, had taken his arm and steered him back to the car, but not without passing the door, not without seeing Will's handiwork in stark thick drops against the floor.

The two men are silent, and Will swallows trying to get the rushing blood in his head to slow down enough for him to hear again. the one in front of him, the agent, raises his eyebrows and lets out a long slow breath before his eyes flick to his friend… Will doesn't turn, doesn't move beyond still holding the damned box at two corners and shifting his grip.

It doesn't take very long for the agent's eyes to clear from confusion to recognition. "You're that agent they put on Lecter."

Rocking back on his heels, the agent glances back at his companion - a shorter man, less squarely built with an artfully arranged set of curls, smooth shaven, blue eyes. "It's like a goddamn convention," he observes, displaying his palm and the heavy mess of old scars there. The fingers are sluggish and graceless, but they seem to move still.

"Heard you were dead too," he finally answers, with a faint grin. "I guess Lecter likes to make use of the useful. I got owned for a couple of months. Just the way it worked out. I'm still pretty sure you saved my ass that night, though that didn't work out for you."

Jack's eyes fall on the collar Will wears, and his eyebrows draw in a little. "They're looking for him, you know. The FBI. Trying to get a hold-on."

"They have nothing to take him with." Will says quietly, still feeling his heart tattoo words against his throat he can't say. Like sorry. I'm so sorry. "It took me over a year to get what I got, and they never sent anyone else in."

"You didn't get much," the other man says. His accent isn't from here either, a smooth, low murmur that hints at something British but not quite. Will directs his eyes to him a moment, feels the tug of recognition but it doesn't register before he returns his eyes to the man in front of him. the other continues.

"In one year you got something one of us could get in a week." He says, it's not an accusation, the tone is too light, too dismissive of something that should be private and

intimate and unknown, “Perhaps you just needed to know what he liked.”

“I know well what he likes.” Will replies tersely, and the smaller man smiles, bottom lip pressing up just a little to make it a gentle gesture, understanding.

“You’re protecting him,” Jackson says, and Will forces his eyes away from the younger man again, still confused as to why the recognition is knocking at the far reaches of his mind. “After all this. After what you’ve seen him do?”

“It’s much more selfish than it is selfless,” Will replies smoothly, he’s learned to lie very well in the time he’d been undercover, he had had to; survival is a powerful drive. “He goes down and what do you think happens to me?” he swallows, “The FBI wants nothing to do with me. the mob wants me dead. He is the only man standing between me and the pier, I’ll take what I can get.”

The young man makes a gentle sound of disbelief but says nothing, and it hits, suddenly, unexpectedly, exactly who he is.

Will had seen him, once, when he’d followed Hannibal for one of the first Wednesday appointments. He had never caught his name, had never investigated, but this was the young man who had kept Hannibal’s patience in check, his desire for Will reined in. for a long time, Will just looks at him, waits for the blue eyes to meet his before lowering, one side of his mouth quirking as he blinks gently – an approximation of a silent laugh.

Jackson's features have cycled slowly through a range of emotions before he finally shoves his hands in his pockets and settles on uncomfortable, after a glance at the other man - Hannibal's proxy for Will, at one time, or perhaps simply a strong indicator of his type.

"They'll take you for a hold-on if they can get you. They were here after him yesterday, but they realized that's all stale. Probably got that out of your old reports," Jackson continues, with an indicating toss of his head toward his companion. The motion hesitates, turns into a lingering glance, of the protective kind. "I don't know what they want, but they wanna deal for it, and if they can get you I think they probably got a good one."

He slides his eyes between Will and his companion for a moment. "If you're wise you'll scram. Or you could always see if they'll exchange protection for co-operation on your part. Could be a way out, if you're tired of waiting for the pier, right?"

Will blinks and Jackson raises an eyebrow.

“Europe’s started a war,” he reminds him gently, “Co-operation is worth a lot, especially to someone with connections like Lecter has.”

“Co-operation was worth a lot before the war,” Will replies, bringing a hand up to rub his face gently. He sighs, ducks his head in a shaky nod before holding out his hand to the man in front of him. “Yours kept me alive, in Chicago. Thank you.”

Jackson takes it with a faint hesitance, before he just shakes it. "Maybe you kept me alive too."

Perhaps Hannibal had stayed his hand from the knowledge that Jack would be useful to him someday - or perhaps because Will had carefully handled the situation. Either way, they were both alive after all that. When the handshake stops, he settles his hands behind his back and lets out a sigh, then seems to remember what he was doing.

He crouches down to hoist the box again. "What were you doin' here anyway?" he grunts, hoisting up the box. "Strange place to stand around thinking. Ah, forget it. I don't wanna know."

With the cardboard securely in his hands he glances at his companion. "You ready to say goodbye to this dump?"

The young man gives the building behind him a wistful look before shrugging and grabbing the suitcase again.

"Now's a good a time as any." He hoists the heavy thing up just enough to carry and shakes his head with a smile when Will offers to help.

"Get out if you can do it," he tells him, pausing close enough for his words not to carry, "And get him out. for someone in the business that he's in, he has more compassion than most people I deal with."

He shrugs again and adjusts his grip before following Jackson to the car parked just down the street, trunk open. Will doesn't linger, leaves them to pack, to leaving, and lets his feet take him where they need to.

He wanders for a long time, stopping by a vendor for bad watery coffee before continuing on his way. He walks until he's tired, until he craves the warmth of the apartment, the quiet whines of happiness Winston makes when he sees him return home, the promise Hannibal had made that morning. So he returns then, noting that Hannibal will most likely beat him home by a few minutes; he won't keep him long.

Hannibal hasn't yet had time to sink into worry when he arrives, but he is standing downstairs with Winston on a lead and waiting for the dog to do his evening necessities, patient and calm though, for Hannibal, he is half undressed. There is an absence of cufflinks and tie, the jacket abandoned but the vest remains over the unbuttoned collar of his shirt, and he dares the cool air without a coat.

Theoretically, he is only in it long enough for the dog to finish, but he looks up as Will approaches and arches his eyebrows.

It's very nearly domestic, utterly close to normal, and very strange for the fact. "Did your head clear any?" He asks, tone low - he is far from angry, but genuinely curious to know if the walk had worked. Perhaps he could use one himself.

Will shrugs, offering a small smile, before eventually nodding. He had occupied his mind with something else, which is what he'd needed.

When Winston has finished, he turns the lead over to Will, and holds the door to let them upstairs, and he seems to count exactly five minutes for Will to finish with the dog, saying his hellos and letting Winston off the lead so he could curl on the nest of a bed that Hannibal has arranged for him in the kitchen. Then he pins Will suddenly up against the dividing wall of the apartment, affixes his mouth at his neck around the leather stripe of collar.

It's startling and Will's heart beat rockets through his body as he gasps and tilts his head back for Hannibal to have better access. The tension vibrates between them, like a guitar string slowly coming to rest, and Will doesn't struggle so much as push up against the restraint, encourage with quick breaths and willing submission.

"I didn't expect to be so late," he breathes, and he feels his lips curve up on a smile.

"What kept you?" Hannibal asks, mouth against skin as he leaves another sting of his teeth, as he works to strip the coat off of Will, and then takes his hands one at a time to rub the warmth back into them between his own, without moving any further back than he has to, keeping Will held firmly between the wall and himself.

He takes one of the rings on the collar between his teeth and tugs just a little, for the sensation of metal and stretch, and then finally eases back, apparently deciding he is not about to stop in the middle to get them upstairs. "Tell me as you come up," he decides, working the buttons on his own vest as he turns away, reaching back to tug Will along by the collar of his own shirt just once in a gesture that leaves little room for argument.

Will smiles and rolls his neck before following as requested.

"The past caught up with me," he says finally, not wanting to elaborate just now, not wanting to bring his afternoon into this, with all its intricacies and complications, not when he could have this, and have his mind held blank and his sensations overrun with something good for a change.

"I was thinking." He adds, finally stepping onto the flat wooden floor of their bedroom and tugging his tie loose. He wonders where this will go today, what Hannibal has in mind. if he's honest, Will just misses him, misses the way they used to so easily fall into a pleasurable routine together, before all this, before the war, before the trial. He misses it, and he wonders, sometimes, if they can work themselves back to back then.

"But I've had enough of it."

"A heavy task," Hannibal allows, not pressing for further elaboration on a past catching up with them - which for either of them could be difficult. He trusts that if there was an issue - a real danger to either of them, Will would bring it forward. "Taking your thoughts away."

He covers Will's hands with his own, lowers them to the man's side and finishes the tie on his own, before he loops it around his fingers and considers. "I shall have to demand all your focus."

The tie loops back against his palm once, not quite in half, before he lifts it, asking permission with only a moment's pause before he settles the wide end over Will's eyes and

ties the ends together to leave him blind and trusting in Hannibal's care, tracing the backs of his fingers over Will's lips before he sets to work on the man's buttons, and then each cuff link, before he draws the shirt off of Will - insistently pushing Will's hands down after he lifts each one to indicate he shouldn't attempt to help, that Hannibal was in control.

Will doesn't argue the blindfold, gently opens his lips to the touch before letting Hannibal do what he wants, allowing his touch and hearing to become stronger, compensate for his lack of sight. He stays still, obedient, as Hannibal reminds him to be, but not motionless. He tilts his head up, rolls his shoulders back when they're exposed to the cool air of the apartment, makes a quiet humming sound as he feels Hannibal's hands gently touch him, just points, never longer than a few seconds with his fingertips before moving on.

It's meticulous and careful, and leaves Will impatient and needy quickly, turning his head to follow Hannibal as best he can, until soft fingers clasp his chin and set it facing straight again, thumb coming up to press against his lower lip and gently tug it down.

"Stay."

And Will furrows his brows but does, despite being desperate for Hannibal to touch him more, for him to kiss him – as he hadn't done all day.

"I'm staying." He says, lips quirking slightly, and he knows Hannibal smiles back before he lets him go.

For a long moment, there is no contact, the sound of Hannibal moving away again, the linens shifting on the bed, a shuffle of sound that suggests Hannibal discarding his shoes before the other returns nearly silently, save for an appreciative sound, low in his throat as Will remains still. He traces his fingers down the curve of Will's spine, and then follows it with the soft coil of the rope he has retrieved.

It is a warning, before he begins to work it in artful loops, focusing Will on the sensation of it against his chest, just so - against his ribs, and then over his pectorals in wide loops that suggest the beginnings of a harness, but do not yet truly restrain.

Will makes a soft sound but doesn't struggle, it's no longer frightening, not with Hannibal's soft assurances, not with time settling a lot of Will's fears. He hadn't struggled the first time he'd been bound, he won't struggle now. The rope is rough but not painful, slightly different make than the one Hannibal had used on him a year ago. Will swallows and arches, presenting his throat again, pushing forward just a little for Hannibal to get the idea, to see where his desperation stems from, and what for.

It's only when he begins to draw the loops closed to restrict Will's movement that Hannibal finally presses their mouths together, kissing Will forcefully, pulling him tight against him with the handhold the rope affords and bending Will until he is nearly supplicant in posture, until he has to lean into Hannibal to keep his balance, and Hannibal holds it for him.

He kisses fiercely, and then draws back, repeats the gesture, and asks with Will still drawn against him, "Tell me when your mind is clear."

Will makes a helpless sound and it takes a moment for him to allow Hannibal to take his weight, to know he'll hold him, before he relaxes, responds properly.

"You'll know when it is," he answers, tilting his head again, parting his lips and seeking more, now that touch has been effectively taken from him as well. It's exhilarating, his heart pumps quickly against the ropes, and Will smiles. He's taking all his control, everything Will could use to retaliate, to continue working, to stress himself with, is gone. All he has is the balance Hannibal offers him, and that's all he needs.

He draws Will's arms up behind his back and loops the rope there at his wrists in a figure eight, easing Will back onto his own feet before he moves around behind and tucks the tail ends of the rope back through the loops, to leave it neat.

Hannibal moves against him from behind, settling his mouth at the back of Will's neck, feeling Will's fingers turn against him and curl into his shirt to hold tight, as he reaches down to work the fastenings on Will's pants and push them over his hips, before he settles his palms deliberately wide over his thighs and pulls him back to feel how it affects him, too.

He runs his mouth against the skin above the collar, and then warns the coming bite below it, in the skin between his shoulder blades with a faint pinch of teeth before he sets to it with intent to mark, with intent to draw Will's mind down into one focused point of pain while he skirts his fingers along the fabric over Will's cock, stimulating more with the touch of the fabric than his own direct contact.

Will's brows draw together hard and he moans, the sound high and breathless and his fingers curl harder behind him, seeking to touch any part of Hannibal he's allowed. He ducks his head forward, rolls his shoulders in a smooth curve and bites his lip before shifting his hips forward against the barely there touch, seeking friction and warmth.

It helps focus Hannibal as well, finding the edge for Will, and taking him down from all his anxiety and worry, keeping him under enough sensation to forget. He pushes until Will steps out of his pants, and then steps away, crouches to help him from his socks, and then his boxers, and guides him until he backs into the bed, eases him down onto it.

"More?" he asks, after a moment, and another loop of rope trails up the inside of Will's thigh, a request and promise both.

Will nods, arching up into the gesture, the touch against him taking most of his concentration; everything it leaves goes on keeping his breathing even, on keeping his sounds to quiet near-whimpers as he shifts to seek more touch. He draws his knees up and bends, neck arched in a pleasing line as he feels the bite throb between his shoulders, another mark, another memory. He hopes Hannibal leaves more, leaves Will completely debauched and exhausted by the end of this, broken in the best possible way.

He hopes he leaves him coherent enough, even for a while, to reciprocate properly, to touch Hannibal back, leave red marks down his back in parallel lines, leave bites of his own…

Hannibal shifts Will's legs up, bent, and strokes gently along the sensitive flesh inside as he binds thigh to calf at two places - ankle and apex and just below the knee, three loops worked

in figure eight at each, and then attaches via a line to the existing bonds around Will's chest, so he can brace them up and alternate the support between his muscles and the bindings.

For a moment he steps back, leaves Will without contact until the man begins to shift seeking it, eyes on his work and the picture it presents, as he sees to his own clothes, and gathers the whole set into the bag for cleaning.

Will sighs out encouragingly when Hannibal touches him again, settling onto the bed with him and tracing his way around the skin by the ropes with his fingertips, feeling the way Will shifts and arches to each sensation, the way he unconsciously guides Hannibal toward where he most wants to be touched.

He skirts Will's cock deliberately, before he settles his mouth gently against the inside of Will's thigh, beneath the loops of rope and sets to marking him again, until Will's voice answers the sensation and he pauses to ease his tongue over the red marks his teeth had made.

Then he moves his way down, and feels Will curl himself up into it, knowing what's coming.

Will’s breathing is hitched, uneven, and he’s trembling, every part of him so sensitive that Hannibal could breathe over him and he would respond.

“Am I allowed to –“ it’s a quiet thing, a very quick, very careful plea. He doubts he would be punished for anything here, now, but he wants to make sure, to see if Hannibal wants to see him try to hold out, to watch him endure, suffer beautifully before he gives him what he needs so much.

He wishes he could see Hannibal, but he doesn’t ask for the blindfold to be removed. He knows he himself must look fairly obscene already: tied open, flushed and begging with everything he can, aching to get closer, arching to it.

He lets out a gentle whine when he feels Hannibal move closer still, and bites his lip, the muscles in his stomach constricting and relaxing over and over in a gentle undulation, moving against the anticipation of something, knowing Hannibal will sit back, watch him work himself into breathlessness before finishing the job for him.

"What would you do if I said no?" Hannibal wonders, from close enough that warm air slides over Will's skin with his voice. "Not just until I said, but not at all."

The tone is thoughtful, but without real promise. Hannibal passes his tongue over his lower lip and finally licks a firm stripe up Will's cock, just once in promise, before he curls his hands beneath Will's hips and turns him over onto his front, so he is braced up on his bent knees, and to give his tied hands a little relief.

Will is spread wide and curled vulnerable, shoulders pressed down into the mattress, and Hannibal appreciates the picture he makes, slides his palms over the arch of Will's back, the curve of his ass, and then leans down to follow the first brush of the backs of his fingers against him with his mouth, just to feel him try and surge into as his voice tears free.

Hannibal follows the long heated sensation of his tongue with frigid lube, and reminds. "Ask me again when you are nearer." But he makes no promises one way or another as his fingers rub circles and then he returns to using his tongue.

Will’s fingers curl into tight fists and relax, before doing it again. soft tremors run through him over and over as Hannibal works to break him apart and Will works to stay together. It’s a rivalry, familiar, but somehow without the anger, the underlying malice as it had been before. It doesn’t take long before the tremors become shaking, and Will is shifting back against tongue and fingers and anything Hannibal deems fit to give him.

Sounds escape him without his express permission to, and he supposes that’s the point; to get him so far out of his own mind that he has no idea if he ever had one at all. He tries to bite his tongue, bite the sheets, but finds that whenever he muffles his enjoyment the delicious torment increases until he’s helpless to what his body wants to do and relents trying to silence it.

He presses his face against the sheets, eyes closed beneath the tie, lips parted to breathe and whimper, and he considers Hannibal’s thoughtful words of before. What would he do if Hannibal said no? he supposes he’d suffer, he supposes he’d last a few days before he was brought down to complete desperation. What frightens him, at the back of his mind, the part that still believes that he should be free, that he shouldn’t be a captive of circumstance and – ultimately – choice, is that he wouldn’t leave.

“Please,” it’s a moan, weak but loud.

He would stay, and learn to live with new circumstances.

"A few minutes more," Hannibal requests, and he turns Will again, settles him onto his back to watch the changes play over his face as he curls one hand around Will's cock and presses for entrance with slick fingers - three in a slow breach that stretches Will wide - but he is open and ready for it, nearly bucking up into it as Hannibal tests him.

The ropes do the work of holding Will's legs suspended, of keeping him partially still even as he twists himself into it, and Hannibal doesn't correct him for it, though he speeds his pace until Will is biting his lower lip on soft sounds, curls his fingers until he can almost hear Will clawing against the coverlet beneath himself, and Hannibal doesn't relent until Will lets go of his lower lip with a gasp.

Doesn't grant permission until the point is almost moot, pushing in firm circles against Will's prostate while he reaches up and pushes the blindfold up off Will's eyes and finally allows, 'Now,' as he strokes him over, and watches the focus fade from the wide-blown pupils of Will's eyes.

It’s intense enough to have Will see stars, just on the edge of his vision as he twists in Hannibal’s hands and finally settles back to the bed, throat working to swallow as he tries to catch his breath. He’s aware that he’s still making quiet sounds, aware that despite the desperation of before, the near-agony of holding back as he’d been told, his lips are stretched in a smile, face relaxed in utter bliss for the few moments Hannibal gives him to breathe.

He’s fairly certain his mind is clear now, he has nothing in there but a quiet hum of white noise and the hammering of his heart as it steadily slows. Even if he could speak, Will probably wouldn’t, content to drift as he feels Hannibal’s hands on him again, gently touching his skin again, leaning over him to stroke his hair and press soothing soft kisses against the side of his face and down his throat.

He realizes that if Hannibal were to give him his freedom, give him what Will had initially wanted when he had saved him from the bathhouse, he wouldn’t go. he wouldn’t leave the man alone in the cold of war, wouldn’t leave him in the aftermath. He doesn’t class the emotions as love, doesn’t think they are in any technical sense of the word, but he knows that unless he’s driven away he won’t go. and even then he’d petulantly fight to stay.

He blinks his eyes open when Hannibal gently rouses him from his sleepy, tangled thoughts, and Will smiles to watch the other man mirror the expression.

Hannibal's eyes are as distant and thoughtful, and he presses a kiss under Will's chin, finding his smiling expression as willing and as welcome as he had never thought to see again on him. He slides his fingers beneath the coils of rope and flexes them into the confines.

"I should leave you helpless to my whims more often," he muses, without threat, as he pushes his fingers against the mark he'd left between Will's shoulders. Hannibal finds it appealing to see Will this way, tied and sated - slashes of dark colored rope against his flushed skin, with the collar settled around his neck as the darkest mark of all.

Still, Hannibal has a sense for when a tie is too tight -as he always has - and he works the loops free, untying Will's hands at the last and then rubbing the wrists gently between his hands to encourage circulation.

He has risked much to give them this opportunity, played a lot in his gamble to own Will Graham, picking up what chips the man had dared lay on the table every time without notice that his own were spilling out of his hands just as quickly. He had teased at saying no - but even now he knows he is unlikely to fully deny Will. They have bargained for each other's souls, and perhaps someday the stakes will change again, but as yet they are content to count the full measure of victory against each other.

“Perhaps I’ll even let you.” Will replies quietly, turning his wrists in Hannibal’s hands before gently extricating them and stretching his arms over his head, pulling his muscles taut before relaxing completely with a quiet hum.

“You’re thinking too much.” He tells Hannibal after a moment, eyes searching his face before he sits up to press his teeth lightly against his collarbone, just enough to feel. Then, just as Hannibal’s process had been gentle with a hinted edge, so Will’s approach is softness; hands over his back but not yet to mark, knees spreading around him until they’re sitting comfortably against each other again.

Slowness brought about by the complete lack of strength in him to do more than seek comfort and offer it.

"I'm thinking about you," Hannibal allows, but he lets Will distract him anyway, sitting up with his back against the headboard as Will straddles his lap, and he strokes slow lazy patterns over the impressions left in Will's skin by the coils of rope he had lain on.

This time, Hannibal bends to bare his neck, before he reaches up and curls two fingers under Will's collar to pull it snug - not so tight to hinder his breathing, but enough to let him feel it. "Will you make me forget, then?" he asks, half challenging with his fingers coiled in the leather.

Letting his fingers fall away, Hannibal settles his hands on Will's hips, pulling them close together, feeling Will slowly revive from pliancy and softness to sharpness and... mischief perhaps.

“What would you do if I said no?” Will murmurs, a smirk spreading his lips as he repeats Hannibal’s words back to him. Since the beginning, Hannibal had sought to own, had sought to control and mold and shape Will to be what he wanted him to be; the protégé, the lover, the humiliated mistake. And Will had never let him, fought too hard, bent the wrong way, found similar ends his own way.

Hannibal smiles at the careful reflection of his own words back at him. It is a slow, pleased thing, and just a little dark. He knows that William could no more say no than he could have - not forever, anyway.

“At Nantuxent, before Zhabei, you let me in. Will you let me again?” Will draws his fingers over Hannibal’s lips, fingertips , not the backs like Hannibal prefers. He wonders if he’ll be allowed that show of honesty again, when they had been so close to breaking each other down and finding what was beneath.

He wonders if Hannibal will let Will take him apart as he had so meticulously done to him just before.

Hannibal considers the proposition, and supposes that he has let Will further in than he has ever allowed anyone. "Are you asking me to?" he responds, and then allows Will's fingers to penetrate his mouth, to push down with their pads on the flat of his tongue. He allows them to slide into his mouth, and curls his tongue up beneath them, sliding in welcome, until Will withdraws them again.

"Yes," he answers finally. The distraction will be good - welcome. It will blank his mind to thoughts of ownership and future and possible failure and the desperate way he is clawing not to lose absolutely everything. He finds any further statement he might make pushed down under damp fingertips again, and he allows himself to be silenced.

Will smiles again, lips parted in sympathy to how Hannibal’s are, eyes following the movement of soft tongue against his fingers before he withdraws them and leans in to press his mouth there instead.

It will not be as rough as it had been then; desperate and angry and wanting – needing – something from the other without asking for it. No, Will wants it slow, wants Hannibal aching and arching into him as Will had been earlier, he wants to bring him to the same level

of utter debauchery and he wants to do it with patience. To play Hannibal’s game against him.

He kisses them like they’ve grown used to, sharing the experience instead of fighting for it, instead of manipulating with it. it’s soft and lasts as long as Will wants it to, bringing his hands up to tangle in Hannibal’s hair and hold him still when he pulls back so they can take a breath. His other hand slides between them, fingers just caressing the skin at the base of Hannibal’s cock, enough to feel the man’s stomach curve inwards, feel him shift up just enough for Will’s fingers to press harder.

Hannibal exhales a sound, almost a sigh of relief as Will strokes him until his body responds fully - open fingered touches that tease and still promise eventual relief. Hannibal lets his eyes fall nearly closed, watching Will touch him, sliding his own hands up Will's back and pressing his fingers in hard when something catches his attention.

He allows some of his usual reserve to slip, gives in a little to trust and allows his own focus to fade, because he wants to. Because finally, he can afford to - to ease down into trust and know that whatever leniency he allowed would not have undue advantage taken of it. For Hannibal, it's a rare luxury.

When will grips him in earnest, he lets his eyes fall the rest of the way closed and breathes a sound against his ear, low encouragement, and half challenge for Will to coax more from him.

And Will does, turns his hand just so, runs the side of his nail under the head until Hannibal’s sighs become quicker, louder against him, and then Will presses closer, pushes up until he’s on his knees over Hannibal, chest to chest.

“Do you want me to make you forget?” he murmurs, reaching around Hannibal to get the lube, not yet opening it, using it, but just holding it in a way that Hannibal would see it if he opened his eyes. “Or remind you?”

He doesn’t know what his day wrought, he doesn’t know what he had to face in the aftermath of the war announcement. He watches Hannibal struggle daily, keeping the lies that Will invents for him, with him… he could remind him that they’re safe, for now, together, or he could make him forget that it’s perhaps because of Will that he suffers so much, because of Will’s desire to save, Will’s urge to wipe away his own mistakes by making someone else’s right.

In our family, one must own their mistakes.

"I doubt I've forgotten," Hannibal trails his fingers through Will's hair, and lets his eyes slide open - his breath has gone quick, and he lifts his hips a little just to roll them against Will's. For as much as he suffers, he has always had the control. The ability to discard the situation as coldly and callously as he had any other and wash his hands of it.

He could have forgotten long since now, but he had chosen to keep trouble close at hand instead.

Meeting Will's gaze he curls his expression into a smile. "I've never limited myself to only one option as a matter of course," He answers at last, and leans up to kiss Will - it's not true, there is at least one obvious falsity apparent after that statement. But he has always presented an unsatisfactory image to the world. "I could demand both."

He leaves out that he is in no position to do any demanding at all, even as he gasps into Will's next reminder of that same notion, arching his body and clawing his fingers against Will's back.

“You could.” Will responds, leaning close again to draw his lips over Hannibal’s jaw and down, “I could say no.”

He shifts his hand to rub just over the head, again and again until Hannibal makes another sound that hits a louder volume than his breathing, makes Will smile.

He could say no and be allowed to, and that wasn't something everyone could say. Perhaps, on matters that were truly important, no one before Will. Hannibal does not even pretend to argue the point - but he is beautifully distracted at the moment, eyes closed and mouth open and soft around his breath.

“But that’s not true is it,” Will adds after a moment, kissing just under Hannibal's chin and pulling away, enough to make Hannibal shift to him on his own, as he helps him lie flat against the bed and kisses him again when he’s tugged. He won’t deny him enjoyment, he’s not punishing Hannibal, far from it. for a few moments he presses close, skin to skin from chest to hips, rolling his own down in a gentle relentless motion until Hannibal’s fingers dig into his skin again and he pulls back.

“Can either of us deny the other anything?” he muses, his smile distant, before he blinks and his attention is on Hannibal again, fully, and he presses kisses down his chest and lower until he takes him in his mouth without a word and hums, eyes closing as he sucks to pull off and do it again.

Hannibal stretches himself up into it, and finds one of his hands clawing into the comforter for a grip, the other messily in Will's hear as his voice pulls out of him in a long sound that borders, very nearly, on begging - by tone if not words. There is no satisfactory answer to the question, so he does not answer it.

They had tried - they had both tried to deny each other freedom, and in the end here they were, free as ever but chained to each other by their own choice. Hannibal twists his hips up, hissing a warning as he tries to find words with his voice and showing his teeth just a little as Will draws back more slowly this time, pushes the flat of his tongue over the head of Hannibal's cock and answers his voice with a low hum of his own.

"William," it's a warning - or a request for clarity. He is asking, just as William had, to know if he should be enduring as long as Will asks or allowing himself to be pushed.

“Stay,” he breathes, kissing his hip gently and relenting, not tormenting him more as he slicks his fingers up and begins to prepare him, a coaxing, gentle stretch but more than Hannibal usually spent on Will; as much as he enjoys the control, he very rarely gets to see Hannibal

undone quite like this. So he takes his time, allows his mouth to explore the rest of Hannibal laid out in front of him, muscles taut and pushing up against him, very nearly desperate in a way Will knows only he gets to see.

By the time Hannibal is rolling his hips against him, the low hum louder but still wordless, Will has left his marks, many, against his stomach and chest. Marks of his teeth, bruises where he'd sucked the blood to the surface, parallel lines of his nails… and Hannibal has held up admirably under the assault against his skin, and for a moment Will relents and kisses him again, completely pliant, ready but waiting to see if Hannibal needs that moment to reassure himself of his control, or settle himself with the notion that they can share it.

Under the prior assault, Hannibal has let his thoughts flee, every sting carving away some measure of his focus until he feels scoured by the pleasant sting of layers of marks, and the slow stretch that is threatening to undo what parts of himself he's held together. He eases into the kiss and rocks his hips up, not demanding but seeking, allowing.

When his hands lift from the blanket, it is to hold rather than direct. They have been working more aligned in these last few months but still somehow at odds and here it feels finally like they can let it go. For a few moments, anyway, before he takes the kiss as it's given to him, curls his hands into Will's hair and pulls their mouths together as he arches up to push his fingers deeper, to show he can take the stretch, that he's ready.

He grips hard when Will finally pushes in, fingers catching at Will's shoulders for the slowness of it - and he recognizes his own deliberation used against him and hisses out a low sound, amused, as he tries to arch and finds Will's hands pinning his hips.

"How often do you wish I'd lose my patience?" he asks, eyes closed and fingers leaving the marks of his nails in Will's lower back.

Will's eyes close as he pushes in, one hand sliding down Hannibal's side to curl under his thigh, shifting it to hold him more open. The question draws a breathless laugh from him.

"You're frightening when you lose your patience," he reminds him, opens his eyes to meet Hannibal's, before nuzzling against him with a gentle sound as he finally stops, deep, and bites his lip. "With me and with others."

"Nnnn," Hannibal agrees, and pulls in a long, deep breath that moves them both. He allows, "I suppose I am."

Will keeps the pace just as maddeningly slow when he pulls out again, watching Hannibal's brows tug together and tighten, both frustration and pleasure written there.

"I would much rather you relax more," he murmurs, shifting to draw his hand against Hannibal's lower back, bend him in a way he himself has been bent – in a graceful curve that Hannibal will end up holding on his own, nerves singing with the messages they send to his brain. The next thrust, slightly harder but just as slow, pushes a gasp from him and Will ducks his head to suck another mark against his collarbone.

"I enjoy hearing when I cause you pleasure."

Lifting his hands to hold about Will's neck, to accept that this will be slow and merciless at the same time while he tries to pull himself together enough to answer in words rather than sounds dangerously close to helpless. His first attempt is a failure, a low sound that answers Will's last statement better than words might.

He leaves it for a time as Will moves, and he lets his mind blank to much but the pleasure, before he turns his mouth against Will's ear and allows his voice to ease free in low sounds at every motion. He will never be as open and free as Will - it hardly suits him, but he can give Will this much, the low vowel sounds he makes when he is not too caught within his own dignity to make them.

Now that they have both agreed to a break from what they knew- if they survived this - perhaps there would be more opportunity in the future for Will to teach him the worth in this. For now, he has it anyway, without reserve. Hannibal's grip grows tighter at Will's back as he gets closer, before one hand slides free to work its way between them and stroke himself in slow time, before Will's hand joins his and encourages a firmer pressure just to hear the effects, to hear Hannibal's voice raise once in warning before he closes his teeth low on Will's neck instead, and pushes the low sounds of his release into the skin there.

After, panting, Hannibal murmurs something too low to hear, gathers his breath and tries again. "Keep rewarding my trust and I shall find it easier to relax," he says, warmly, sated. For the moment, he is free of worry, save that he must gather his breath.

Will follows him over quickly, already sensitive and the sounds Hannibal had made, offered almost, pushing him there. They rest together, Hannibal’s hands heavy against his back, Will heavy against Hannibal in turn. He smiles, then grins, and turns his head to kiss Hannibal’s throat before pushing himself up enough to see the man properly.

“Well, you have me now. I’m sure I’ll find ways.” He kisses him again then, lingering, before pushing up to make his way to the bathroom for a warm washcloth and set the collar aside from around his neck. He takes his time cleaning them both up, hindered only a little by Hannibal’s gentle insistences to help or pull Will closer again. they’re both exhausted, finally sated, for the first time in a long time… comfortable.

When Will returns to bed he crawls in heavy-limbed and pliant, and allows himself to be pulled against Hannibal again. and for a long time neither of them speak, they just breathe, hands moving in gentle motions over skin, or just lying heavy and warm where they rest.

Hannibal pulls the covers over them, as the nights get cool quickly now, and he looks over Will's shoulder out the wide window to the city below, and settles his arm heavy around Will's middle to pull him tight against him.

"In the morning, go into the safe," Hannibal suggests, and he pushes his mouth against the mark he'd left on Will's skin but softly this time, feeling its echoes all up and down his own chest and shoulders. "Take what is important, and find any way you can to get cash together that won't be noticed missing from the accounts. Discard the rest."

They could at the least, buy themselves time if they were ready to move at the instant they were free to. It would be better to go now, before anyone knew to look for them, but they will

wait until the boats come through, and move in the few moments of stillness they have afterward. Hannibal doesn't know where they will go.

Any place they can, for a time. For once, he feels at peace with the sensation - even knowing how badly it could all go, he is so exhausted from worrying and pleasurable exertions it is easy to plan. Will makes a complacent sound, on the point of sleep, and Hannibal does not stir him any further with more plans.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

> *"The point remains," Hannibal murmurs, though he is smiling, "That you want to dance."*

> The final *final* chapter for the Nice Work If You Can Get It series.

> This one is for May, who originally suggested this last scene as a 3-sentence-fic idea for Val, and she liked it so much she wrote it in. And for all the support, on this work and the rest. Bb you are very loved. Thank you.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Because I am starved for culture and amusement," Will says, tilting his head and pushing his hands into his pockets, "And because I have never danced on the rooftops of Philadelphia, have you?"

The apartment is near-empty, cold now with the touches that had made it a home gone. There is very little left. Two mugs, one spoon, coffee already ground in the bottom of the mugs for the morning. The kettle. Upstairs, the bed and safe – the latter staying, sold with the apartment – downstairs two paintings by the door, a Chinese vase and an old hunting rifle, Winston's bed in the kitchen, and the gramophone.

Their lives, their times, reduced to this handful of things that mean nothing on their own, and just enough for their owners to want to transport them safely, with them, when they leave.

It's late, far past a time they should be sleeping and neither can. Will had stayed by the window, watching the city with a strange mixture of fascination and longing before he'd stepped away. Hannibal had watched it a way one watches a child leave home.

Hannibal has thrown open the windows in the kitchen to the freezing night air, and it lets in the taste and promise of snow in the bitter cold, Winston standing at the small openings and lifting his nose to smell the city.

"The point remains," Hannibal murmurs, though he is smiling, "That you want to dance."

The apartment is empty because they are leaving in good order, allowed to make a leisurely retreat though they will never be able to come back. Hannibal would have left it all in as much of a hurry was required, but he had taken the deal laid out for him by a bitter Crawford.

"With you," Will confirms, smile widening when Hannibal repeats it, and walks over to select a record from the shelf, setting it down carefully before adjusting the needle and turning up the volume; when the music starts, it's slow, fits the mood of the evening well enough to have Will smiling more, and he takes Hannibal's hand as the man offers it, turning as he's led to watch the city over Hannibal's shoulder as they sway.

They have never danced before - and Hannibal has not done it in a very long time indeed. Not since he had been a very young man, before the great war, and even then not much. He thinks, briefly, of his father's home, of being warm in the hall with a tiny pair of hands folded in his own and two slippered feet atop his own as they moved in a childish waltz.

William is a better dancer, likely his memories are more recent, his study less antiquated, but Hannibal is a quick learner and he has a natural rhythm that allows him, very shortly after to lead.

"To the last ship," Hannibal offers, and he pauses a moment as Winston brushes against them bringing the cold trapped in his fur and with the first snowflakes melting on his nose. "What will we do now?"

Will rests against him and falls into the gentle sway of their dance. They don't follow specific steps, they move to how the music moves them, and it's enough. Will's had enough of being told and pushed and made to. This is what they've worked to, this is what he wants.

At the question, Will, sighs, stopping them a moment and letting the music play out. What could they do?

They had waited until just before the first shipment before going to Crawford. Before Will went alone. It had taken him days, hours of planning, quiet discussions, coaxing, eventual genuine pleading until Hannibal had pulled him close and closed his eyes and let his fear seep into Will and out, and agreeing.

Will had taken Jackson's advice, had found something to trade, something more important than a trial a year ago that had soured the public view of the FBI. He had found it, negotiated, pushed everything he had into getting Jack to agree. Agree to let them go, both of them, without another point of contact again.

Their trafficking had saved over 5,000 people, had brought families together, had brought also trained men, clever women, people who had been in Europe as the invasions spread, as the animosity grew. They knew more than the press could ever imagine, and they were useful. To the FBI, to the government, to anyone willing to do something to stop this from blowing out of control as the Great War had.

Will gave Jack power. Jack, reluctantly, gave him freedom. Gave Hannibal freedom.

“I suppose we’ll argue over who takes Winston out on cold winter mornings.” He suggests, sending Hannibal a gentle smile.

"He is your dog," Hannibal reminds, though he has on occasion taken his own initiative to walk him. Winston himself is unreserved in the matter, and at times will even shun his master for Hannibal's company, when he senses the man requires the comfort of a warm fur coat beneath his palm.

As much as they could get from the people they had brought out, Hannibal had turned some of his contacts over - the majority of his remaining lines in fact - to get agents interested in keeping track of the situations overseas in. He has torn down what he has or given it away. He won't miss most of it, but the city... the city he will miss. Summers in Nantuxent he will miss, and living without struggle.

For a time they will be fine, laying low and still until they are forgotten enough to move again, but even Hannibal's savings will not last forever. Eventually they'll find a need to work again, and perhaps by then they will have found enough normality to pretend that whatever past they lie about having is the truth.

Will grins, turning his head a little to gently coax Winston away with quiet words, smiling wider at the way he whines but retreats regardless. He’s as much Hannibal’s dog as William’s now, used to them both, comfortable with them both… he has managed to train Hannibal in giving him scraps from the table as effectively as Will had trained him not to beg – successful very rarely and handsomely rewarding when it is.

“Then I suppose, we’ll live. And see.” He murmurs, gently leaning on Hannibal until he leads them again.

Hannibal pushes his cheek against Will's and moves with him, and the steps of the dance are uncertain, but they have grace. And when the music ends, they dance to the slow pulsing of the city’s life below them.

Chapter End Notes

First and foremost... thank you all so much, if you have been with us since the beginning. Nice Work is our first major chaptered piece for the fandom - even though we've been writing it so long now, it really was our first BIG story - and the support for it has been invaluable, from all of you. It helped us get out of writing RP-style double perspective, to how we write now, and looking back we have really, REALLY improved, both with how we write the two mains and how we approach storytelling. This one was character-driven, and we sacrificed a lot of plot in order to see that through, but I still think this is one of our favourite stories and one of my favourite universes and a huge learning curve.

Thank you to anyone who ever commented, left kudos, bookmarked, even just passed their eyes over it. Thank you.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!